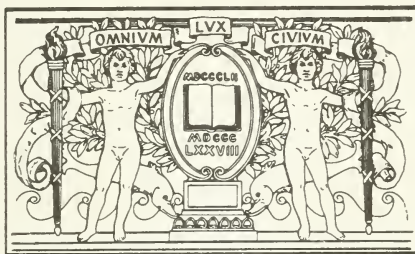


BUT MEN
MUST WORK

ROSA N. CAREY



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BUT MEN MUST WORK

BY

ROSA NOUCHETTE CAREY

AUTHOR OF "NOT LIKE OTHER GIRLS," "QUEENIE'S WHIM," "MARY
ST. JOHN," "ESTHER," ETC.



PHILADELPHIA

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“BUT MEN MUST WORK.”

CHAPTER I.

MISS HILLYARD.

IN looking back over one's past life from the safe though somewhat monotonous level of middle age, one is conscious of added clearness of vision, of a more thorough comprehension of the verities and unmasked realities of existence, that start up like whitened mile-stones along an unending road. In the hurry of youth we overlook these prominent points that intersect the different stages of our being; the light is too strong in our eyes; one must descend into the well to view the concealed starlight. We draw our own visionary horizon. To be young is to live. Beyond youth lies blankness, absolute negation: to grow old—pshaw! as well threaten the young with a palsy, with the death-in-life of paralysis! it is

the dreadful hereafter, which no healthy imagination will depict for a moment. And yet, if they only knew it, age offers delicate compensations. In a flat country one can walk more securely, and a greater breadth of landscape adds to the pleasure of the pedestrian; the imagination may shirk somewhat, but the memory enfolds treasures of past comforts and experiences: in the baldest and most prosaic life the affections must have watered many an oasis.

But philosophy, however well defined, may grow irksome. I have been tempted to generalise, before gathering up a few stray threads from a life that by most folk would be termed meagre and uninteresting, but which, lived moment by moment in fearless simplicity, was to me, its owner, certainly not devoid of pleasurable sensations. Written down in black and white, the amount of pleasure may have seemed at first sight somewhat limited.

A middle-aged worker in the human hive, a daily governess without living kith and kin, certainly presents a modest margin to expectation. Life's interest must wax feeble at such a low level; there could be no high tides of strong recurrent excitement. Chut! let these

young merry babblers hold their peace: would I change places with them, knowing that their climbing powers have not yet been assayed, that they are still at the bottom of the ascent, with all their troubles bristling like an array of spears to meet them?

Once I too was discontented, and threw weary, critical glances around me; but that was before I learned my lesson more perfectly—that hardest of all lessons, taught by a saintly teacher, “to ask nothing, to refuse nothing”—to be content with following the reapers. Now people tell me sometimes, and they say it with all earnestness, that it makes them happier in their minds, and more satisfied with themselves, only to be with me, “for you are so cheery, my dear Miss Osborne, such a comfortable sort of person altogether, that it is really a relief to talk to you;” and a speech like this makes me supremely happy for a fortnight, for to diffuse heart-sunshine must be better than all the gifts of the fairies put together. But it was not always so. How well I remember one bitter March afternoon, when the east wind that penetrated to my bones and scarified every nerve seemed more bearable than the dull foggiess that had crept over my

spirits and blocked up every avenue to cheerfulness!

I was in mourning for my sole relative, an aunt, my father's sister, and a widow in tolerable circumstances. I had attended her death-bed, and, though there had been small interchange of sympathy between us, I had striven to mourn for her decently. A certain pathos at the idea that there was only one Osborne remaining formed the nucleus of a few tears. They dried up—nay, they were frozen—when a fifty-pound note was put in my hand and a well-digested plan for a dozen almshouses was shown to me by the lawyer. I had not consciously coveted my aunt's money, my health was good, and I was not afraid of work: nevertheless the niggardliness of the action oppressed me. There had only been two Osbornes, and she was my father's sister. Well, peace be with her: she meant well, and the old women whom she clothed and fed as well as housed doubtless rose up and called her blessed; but I have a notion that in that other world the scheme over which her lawyer gloated would hardly have looked so fair and consistent, and even an engraved motto, cut in the whiteness of the stone, may have failed to provoke ad-

miration in angelic eyes. Troubles seldom come singly; I was out of employment just then, my last pupil had married, and I had nothing else in view; and but for my scanty savings and the fifty pounds, together with a tolerable stock of clothes, I should have felt my courage at a low ebb. As I walked through the quiet chain of squares lying behind Bloomsbury, I fought with an unusual and most benumbing sense of utter nameless depression; a feeling of loneliness, of failure, of unwonted pessimism, weighed me down. "What is the meaning of it all?" I asked myself, querulously. "What is the use of living a mere unit of humanity? I belong to no one; no one cares for me or would be the better or worse if I were to be swept out of life: there are governesses enough in the world and far too many women jostling one another in the search for employment: like Jonah, I am weary of my life," and so on through the whole gamut of feminine despondency; and all the time a dozen wrinkled, smiling countenances seemed to rebuke my sourness. Nevertheless the niggardliness of my only relative still oppressed me. Money was less to me than kindness; all my life I had wished to be loved; so

little would have contented me—just the dregs where others had quaffed. It was in this mood and under these depressing circumstances that I presented myself at the agency office to which I usually resorted. Miss Brown was an old acquaintance of mine; her nod and smile called up a wintry smile in response; anything else in the general fogginess was clearly impossible. She looked at me a little narrowly as she pointed to a chair: she was making an entry; she would speak to me in a moment. Five minutes of irritating quill-penmanship on her side, of dissatisfied self-communing on mine, then Miss Brown was ready for business.

"You look cold and tired, Miss Osborne. Draw nearer to the fire. It is a depressing day. I had your note yesterday."

"I hope you have something in view that will suit me. I am not over-particular, you know."

"Should you object to the country?"

"Not at all. I feel in need of a change. London all the year round is monotonous; but," in a less sanguine tone, and with a return of fogginess, "you forget that I have an objection to any residential situation. I prefer a moderate degree of freedom, my evenings to

myself." For how could I part with Mousquetaire, the four-footed companion of my lodgings?

"Ah, no, I remember; you only desired daily employment; and, strange to say, I think I have something that will suit you exactly. I was reading your note when a lady called: she had been recommended to my agency. Now, I wonder if you would think Walton too far from London—Walton in ——shire, I mean."

"The distance would be a matter of indifference to me, as long as it is in England. I have no wish to go abroad. Let me hear all about it, Miss Brown."

"The lady's name was Hillyard—Miss Hillyard. She said her mother's health obliged them to live in a very secluded way, and that her sister's education had been somewhat neglected in consequence, at least as far as regards accomplishments. Miss Hillyard was a very pleasing person"—here Miss Brown paused, as though to find an adequate expression—"a most interesting person, exceedingly so," breaking off without rounding her sentence: she was always a little rugged in speech.

"Young?"

"Ah, yes; not a girl—by no means a girl; indeed, I noticed grey hairs. A very ladylike person, and decidedly out of the common. Money seemed no object; she offered liberal terms; but the conditions struck me as a little peculiar."

"In what way?" somewhat sharply.

Miss Brown seemed to find my question difficult.

"I can hardly tell you," with an apologetic laugh at her own vagueness. "It was more the sort of impression given me, for Miss Hillyard was perfectly straightforward and practical. She said at once that a resident governess was out of the question; the presence of a stranger in the house would distress her mother's weak nerves; a few hours daily would be all that would be required; and then she asked me a little anxiously if I thought a lady would mind living in rooms near them—would a short walk be any impediment—would not many ladies be glad to have their evenings free? And then I thought of you. Miss Hillyard's face quite brightened—she looked sad enough, poor thing—when I told her that in my opinion you would be the very person."

"I can see nothing peculiar in this; it all sounds perfectly natural." But to this Miss Brown made no verbal response, only her lips formed into a curious little twist, as though she were determined to keep her thoughts to herself, and I at once felt my curiosity stimulated.

"Miss Hillyard proposed that you should call on her this afternoon," she continued. "She is anxious to leave town as soon as possible. She is staying at a hotel in—stop, I have the address here; I will give you the paper. Any time between three and five will do. There will be no need of references, I have settled all that, so you can make your own terms; and I hope you will be able to come to a satisfactory arrangement."

"I hope so too." And then we shook hands, and, after a kindly remark from Miss Brown to the effect that I looked less tired than when I entered her office, I took leave and faced the east wind again. What had happened to me? Miss Brown was not a romantic person, our interview had been strictly business-like, nevertheless I felt cheered, warmed, mentally refreshed: some current of healthy human interest had dispelled the fog. I let myself into

my lodgings with my old alertness, and the very sight of Mousquetaire's waving black tail as he flew downstairs to greet me made me feel cheerful. Let those who will laugh at a lonely spinster, but for an intelligent, loving little companion my black Pomeranian had no equal.

It was in a far different spirit that I set out on my quest that afternoon; I was callous to the east wind, and, instead of indulging in-ward spleen, I was summing up with pardonable pride my little stock of accomplishments. Music was my forte; I was considered by competent authorities to be an excellent teacher; my French was pure, and I had some knowledge of drawing. My weak points—but I would veil them artfully; there was no need to present them in too strong a light; they must be toned, softened down, left in the background. By this time I had reached the quiet, old-fashioned hotel where Miss Hillyard had taken up her temporary abode. A grey-haired waiter came forward to learn my errand, and at once conducted me to a room where a lady was writing in the window. "A lady to see Miss Hillyard," he observed, sonorously, and the bent head was at once raised.

The room was somewhat dim, in spite of the firelight, and for a moment I could not quite discern Miss Hillyard's features. When I did—but it is almost impossible to describe the sudden shock (I know no other word) of surprise, of involuntary admiration, that came over me when I first saw Judith Hillyard's face: ridiculous as it must sound from the lips of a middle-aged woman, I understood at that moment what people mean when they talk of falling in love at first sight.

Had I fallen in love with Miss Hillyard? or was I only penetrated by a sudden feeling of pity for the young, weary face that came between me and the light?

Yes, it was a young face, in spite of the grey hairs that threaded the dark, smooth coils; and the figure, thin and angular in its sharpness, was young too. Those thin, sharp lines spoiled everything; they marred the perfect beauty of the face, they hindered all youthful roundness. As I sat there—for she had waved me to a seat with a hurried, nervous gesture—an odd idea came into my head: I thought if I were an artist, a real artist, I would ask her to sit to me for Ruth the Moabiteess, when her faithful widowed heart was pleading with her mother-

in-law. Something in the sad, dark eyes that suddenly met mine brought the old Jewish idyl to my memory.

She was so silent, she seemed to find it so difficult to commence the conversation, that I came boldly to her relief:

"Miss Brown asked me to call. I am Miss Osborne. She had an idea that I should suit you. You require a finishing governess for your sister."

"Ah, yes," very nervously—but how deep her voice was! but for a certain richness and sweetness and a well-controlled modulation, it would almost have been too deep for a woman—"ah, yes, Miss Brown was good enough to recommend you; she knew our requirements, and she was sure you would suit us perfectly; indeed, she spoke so highly that we ought to consider ourselves fortunate if we can secure your services." Here Miss Hillyard made me a timid little bow, and the glimmer of a smile passed over her fine features.

"I do not know about that. I am old enough to be a little old-fashioned. I have not taken up all the new-fangled theories of education."

"That is all the better," very gently.

"I think I could undertake to teach French

and music, and even drawing, to your satisfaction. With regard to German——”

“There will be no occasion for German. Muriel—my sister, I mean—is very backward. French and music—ah, and drawing—that will be an amusement. Music is the chief difficulty.” Here she looked mutely at a closed piano behind me. I was quick to read her thoughts: I had a singular pleasure, even at that early stage of our acquaintance, in interpreting them.

“Shall I play to you? would you care to hear me?”

Her whole face brightened. I had no need to put the question: she had lacked courage to ask me, that was all. I played as though my whole future depended on her verdict. When I rose, she was wiping a few quiet tears from her eyes.

“How beautifully you play, Miss Osborne! the very notes seem to speak. Muriel will be delighted. Miss Brown spoke truly. Ah, I hope you will consent to teach Muriel, that our terms will satisfy you.” And here she named a sum that seemed sufficiently handsome. The neighbourhood and my lodgings next passed under review, and here again Miss

Hillyard seemed a little anxious: the country was very nice, but should I think a mile's walk every day too long?

"A mile!" somewhat surprised at this question. "Is Leylands such a large place?"

"No, indeed; it is only a tiny village. There are no lodgings to be found there, but there are some nice rooms vacant in Walton; I would take them if you like. Miss Trotter is such a pleasant woman, and there is only one other lodger in the house, a gentleman, one of the masters belonging to the Walton School. I shall be going there to-morrow, and could make all arrangements—that is, if you are not afraid of the walk."

"Nothing could suit me better, and I shall always be home in daylight," for Miss Hillyard had named from half-past nine to two as my hours. We made a few more necessary arrangements, fixed time, train, and put a few mutual questions, and then, as she seemed uncertain how to dismiss me, I brought the interview to a close by rising from my seat. She looked relieved, put out her hand, then drew it back again and gave me a second shy little bow.

"This day fortnight, Miss Hillyard."

"Thanks very much. I will write and tell you when I have made arrangements with Miss Trotter. There is a dog, you say?"

"Yes, my black Pomeranian—such a beauty, Miss Hillyard. All my landladies are devoted to him. I can go nowhere without Mousquetaire."

She smiled, as though my enthusiastic tone amused her. "Very well," was all she said, very quietly, and then the waiter opened the door.

That night I felt as though I had been bewitched. As I lay between sleeping and waking, Miss Hillyard's dark, beautiful face haunted me; I could see her thin hand raised in gentle gesticulation, could hear that deep, strangely-vibrating voice, so young and yet so sad. What could it mean?

CHAPTER II.

"PASTURES NEW."

I LOOKED anxiously for the expected letter. In two or three days it came. Everything had been satisfactorily arranged. Miss Trotter had promised to make me comfortable; my train was fixed, and with a few kindly words followed the signature Judith Hillyard. I wonder how many times I read that concise, lady-like note. Admiration of the beautiful handwriting was my legitimate excuse: if I had never seen Miss Hillyard, that clear, frank calligraphy would have prejudiced me in her favour. I made my few preparations, bade good-bye to the half-dozen acquaintances who styled themselves my friends, and when the morning of my departure arrived the April sunshine and showers seemed symbolic of the mixed feelings with which I took my seat in the railway compartment.

It was somewhat late in the afternoon when

I arrived: a little country omnibus awaited me; there were no other passengers, but I was content to indulge my thoughts undisturbed, as I feasted my eyes on the green budding hedge-rows, so refreshing to my sight after the close London streets. By-and-bye a few straggling houses told me that we were approaching our destination. I had a flitting view of an old-fashioned market-place, then we turned a corner; a fresh wind blew in our faces, a sunny country road seemed to stretch endlessly before us; there were a hay-stack, some gaily-painted carts in a wheelwright's yard, and, just opposite, two pleasant-looking houses with their lower windows somewhat hidden by a thick privet hedge. The doors were wide open, and, as the omnibus stood before one of them, a trim little woman with red hair and very round blue eyes took possession of me and my luggage.

"Miss Trotter, I believe?"

"Yes, ma'am; and I hope you do not find yourself tired after your journey. Dear me, ma'am! is that the dog? What a beauty! Miss Hillyard mentioned him to me, and, though no lover of dogs, though exceedingly partial to cats, can find no objection to him at

all—indeed, should be ashamed to mention such a thing in connection with him."

It was too soon to detect any peculiarity in Miss Trotter's style of speech; it was much later on that I observed her invincible dislike to the nominative case. Well, we all have our idiosyncrasies, but I never met any one before who so persistently slurred over this useful appendage to a sentence; it was certainly novel, though at the same time somewhat embarrassing, as it tended to obscure the plain meaning: after a time we had our little joke and called it the Trotter dialect; we—dear me! it strikes me that I am becoming a little obscure myself. While Miss Trotter made friends with Mousquetaire, I looked around my sitting-room with secret but strong approval. It was a large, comfortable room, and tolerably well furnished; there were two easy-chairs, a couch, a writing-table, and a large recess where my piano could stand; tea was already laid on the round table, a bright fire burned cheerily in the grate, and a basket of primroses and some Neapolitan violets were on the small table in the window.

My attention was drawn to them at once. "Could Miss Hillyard have brought them?"

I observed, half to myself, but Miss Trotter heard me.

"You are right, ma'am; drove over in the pony-carriage; brought the posy and some new-laid eggs and the little cake, with their compliments."

"They? the two Miss Hillyards?"

"Yes, ma'am, and the younger one brought them in and put them on that table, charged me not to move them; 'they look so nice, Miss Trotter, just where they are; and please give my compliments and my sister's.' Pretty young lady as one wishes to see, and nice-spoken, too. Now, ma'am, shall I show you your bedroom? at the top of the house, am sorry to say, but in this world must study one's interest, and am always expecting a let for drawing-floor, lady or gentleman no object, only good references and respectability insured."

I followed Miss Trotter up two long flights of stairs and down a long, draughty passage. My bedroom was as large as my sitting-room, but the ceiling was low. When I had taken off my bonnet, I stood for a moment at the passage window admiring the pleasant view. It overlooked the back-buildings belonging to

a farm; there were the remains of a hay-stack, a long wooden shed, and some pigs grunting in the straw-yard. Then came the wheelwright's premises: a cart with vermilion wheels blocked up the centre; carts of all sizes, wheels, piles of timber, seemed everywhere; a broad-shouldered man with the gait of Vulcan and a red woollen cap limped across the yard; a little yellow dog ran at his heels barking. Beyond lay some green meadows, stretching as far as one could see, and over everything a soft spring sky with little dappled clouds, streaked here and there with gold. Two or three children passed, dropping primroses as they went. Some oxen were lowing plaintively; a cock was crowing, the swallows or house-martins were twittering in the eaves. How fresh and bright it all looked! "My lines have fallen to me in a pleasant place," I thought, as I walked down the long, windy passage.

As I paced along contentedly I heard Mousquetaire bark in a genial manner, and then followed the flopping of his bushy tail against the stairs, which told me he had found a new acquaintance. I peeped over the balustrade rather curiously, and saw a tall young man

bending over him and evidently making much of him.

"What is your name, you pretty little fellow?" I heard him say; and then as I moved involuntarily he looked up, and on seeing me turned rather red. I guessed, of course, that this was my fellow-lodger, and wished him good-evening as I passed. He replied in rather an embarrassed tone and ran upstairs at racing speed. Very shortly afterwards I saw him again. Miss Trotter was clearing the tea-things, and I was standing at the window, wishing rather ungratefully that the privet hedge did not obscure my view of the road, when he sauntered down to the gate and stood looking out with rather a wistful expression.

I had a good look at him then. He was a tall, thin young man, and carried his height well; he had a pale complexion and peculiarly-cut features, and his hair was dark and closely cropped after the usual convict style at present in vogue. It was rather a Roman type of face, and reminded me of the picture of a young gladiator I had once seen. Perhaps at first sight he did not prepossess me, but I remember I was struck with his free and stately carriage. After all, it matters little how a man

looks, if he only walks well and speaks like a gentleman. One of my pupils once told me that I ought to be blind, "for I notice, Miss Osborne," she remarked, with the pert cleverness of the nineteenth-century young lady, "that you talk more of people's voices than of their faces; you so often say, 'How nicely she speaks!' when I should remark, 'How nice-looking she is!'"

Now, my young Roman, as I called him to myself in an amused sort of way, had only muttered pleasantly: so for once I was disposed to be critical over features that were certainly of no ordinary type.

"Mr. Royston is fond of taking the air," observed Miss Trotter, with a view of making overtures to conversation; "stands like that for half-an-hour at a time. Anyone not knowing him might suppose he was watching for someone."

"His name is Royston, you say?"

"Yes, ma'am; and no one could find a nicer-spoken young gentleman; gives no trouble, and never fusses with his meals; it is, 'Anything you think best, Miss Trotter,' just as though mutton or beef were alike to him; and so light-hearted, too; it quite makes one feel

young again to hear him whistling about the house like a blackbird, or strumming fine pieces on his piano."

"Indeed!" I observed, rather absently, for I never encouraged gossip about my fellow-lodgers, and at this moment the subject of Miss Trotter's encomium suddenly wheeled around and walked quickly into the house. His movements were so sudden that I had no time to draw back from the window, and received a quick, searching glance from a pair of bright, keen eyes. I felt a little annoyed at this *contretemps*—the young man would think I was watching him; but the next instant my thoughts took a different direction: a tall, slender figure in black was coming up the little flagged path, and with a glow of pleasure that must have been fully apparent to her I went forward to welcome Miss Hillyard.

"Miss Hillyard," I said, a little too impulsively, "this is quite an unexpected pleasure. I had no idea of a visit this evening. It is most kind." I think the warmth of my reception took her a little by surprise; for she coloured slightly.

"I am fond of an evening walk. It was no trouble; and I wished to ascertain for myself

that you were quite comfortable. Do you like your rooms?"

My answer quite satisfied her on this point: I professed myself well pleased with my surroundings.

"I am very glad. I hope Miss Trotter will be attentive; she is a very civil, nice-tempered woman, and generally gives satisfaction to her lodgers. If there be anything that we can do for your comfort, I hope you will let us know."

"Thank you very much, Miss Hillyard, but I am a person of few wants." But at this moment Mousquetaire thrust himself into the conversation, and his solicitations for notice were so prettily imperative that even Miss Hillyard's gravity relaxed, and she took him up and petted him to his heart's content.

"I remembered your dog and left Hector outside," she observed presently. "Do you admire deer-hounds, Miss Osborne? Mine is a splendid specimen, and so sagacious and faithful. I never seem to need a companion when I have Hector."

"That is just how I feel with Mousquetaire." And then we descanted a little on the merits of our respective pets. As we talked, I noticed

Miss Hillyard grew a little more at her ease; the nervous fluttering of her fingers, as though she wanted to feel something, which had struck me so much at our first interview, had almost ceased, and a greater look of animation increased her beauty tenfold. But for the want of wanness and thinness, what an exquisite creature she would be, as I thought more than once that evening.

We became quite friendly and confidential after a time; and, without seeming to question me, she somehow elicited a great deal about my former life. Perhaps she considered it her duty to know all about me. I responded with perfect readiness. I even told her about my aunt's legacy. When she heard of the almshouses she shook her head.

"That hardly seems right. Perhaps I ought not to say so, and one should not judge the dead, but to endow strangers and leave her own niece to work for her living—I am afraid if I were you, Miss Osborne, I should feel some secret resentment. How could your aunt justify such inconsistency to her own conscience? But," speaking more to herself than to me, "some people contrive to deaden their consciences."

"My aunt was a philanthropist: she liked her charity to furnish a wide area."

"In other words, she was a Pharisee and liked to hear the trumpet sounded before her."

"I am afraid so, Miss Hillyard."

"Well, there are many people who resemble her; but it is a great pity. I think they need to learn over again the A B C of Christianity. Now it is growing dark, and I must be going: I can hear Hector bark, too, as though he were becoming impatient."

"It is too dark and too late for you to walk alone down that country road, my dear Miss Hillyard. How imprudent!" I spoke in my governess tone, but Miss Hillyard only smiled.

"Imprudent? with Hector? why, he would fly at anyone who ventured to accost me. There is nothing to fear. I am quite used to this road, and Hector and I often take a moonlight stroll together. It is Muriel who is timid, who thinks there are tramps behind every hay-stack. Well, we shall see you to-morrow, then, Miss Osborne—that is, if you are sure you would not rather have a day's rest after your journey." I satisfied her on that point; I was willing, nay, anxious, to enter on my duties at once; I was strong; half-

a-dozen journeys would not have wearied me.

"Very well, then we will expect you. Muriel will be only too delighted to set to work at once. Please remember, Miss Osborne, what I told you just now: you do not turn once until you reach Leylands. It is a tiny village; any child will direct you to 'The Nook'—that is the name of our house. Mind you do not trust to yourself to find it, or you will certainly pass it. Good-bye until to-morrow." There was a faint pressure in response to my cordial grasp, a still fainter smile, and Miss Hillyard's tall figure vanished swiftly through the gate. I followed her unperceived. The spring dusk had not yet deepened into obscurity, and I could see the large, noble-looking hound circle round her once or twice with joyous barks before he took his place at her side, as though he knew it was his duty to keep close to her. I watched them until they had disappeared. In spite of Miss Hillyard's words, I felt vaguely uneasy, the road looked so dark and solitary: what right had a young and beautiful woman to walk alone at so late an hour? was her mother too much of an invalid to control her daughter's movements?

But at this moment I was disturbed in my reflections; there was a quick step behind me, and, with a muttered "I beg your pardon," Mr. Royston passed me, walking in the same direction, as though Leylands were his destination.

"What a curious coincidence that he should have selected that road!" I thought, as I went back to my room to begin my unpacking; but it relieved me a little to know that there was someone else on the road. If I had known the way I would have insisted on accompanying her.

An hour later, I heard Mr. Royston return. He was whistling as he came up the steps and let himself in. By-and-bye I heard him pass my door and go into his room.

CHAPTER III.

THE NOOK.

THE next morning I had just finished my early breakfast and was lingering by the open door a moment to enjoy the crisp freshness of the air, when Mr. Royston in his cap and gown turned in at the gate. To my surprise, as I turned and civilly wished him good-morning, he stopped, and observed, genially, "It is really a beautiful morning, though there is a suspicion of frost in the air," and then he added, in quite a friendly tone, "It seems we are near neighbours."

"Yes, indeed," with a glance at his open door and breakfast-table.

"I hope if I can be of any assistance to you in any little way," here he turned rather red and seemed shy again, "that you will not scruple to make me useful; a lady alone sometimes needs things—I shall be very happy, as Miss Trotter knows—ahem—the paper——"

Should you care to see the paper, Miss Osborne?"

He knew my name already. I had hardly expected these friendly overtures so soon; but I was never slow to respond to any kindly offer. I thanked him, I was going out immediately, I had no leisure until the afternoon; by-and-bye, if he would be so good; but after to-day I hoped I should take in a paper for myself.

"Oh, you are going out?" And he still lingered, as though desirous to prolong the conversation. Last night he had seemed very shy and retiring—had rather shunned me than otherwise. The change in his manner somewhat surprised me, but I was old enough to put any young man at his ease, and it was certainly pleasanter for such close neighbours to be on good terms: so, instead of rebuking his youthful insistence, I answered without hesitation that I was going to Leylands.

"Leylands? Ah, I thought so; at least—it is a pretty spot; everyone walks there—it—I—you shall have the paper this afternoon. I believe my breakfast is waiting." He had evidently come to the end of his conversational powers for the present. He eyed me wistfully but nervously, and backed into his room.

He had made me late, and I hurried off to get ready for my walk. As I passed quickly by the house I looked back. Miss Trotter was at the door, with Mousquetaire in her arms: the poor little fellow was whining to follow me. As I did so, I noticed that Mr. Royston's room had a side-window overlooking the road. Perhaps he had no appetite for his breakfast; but he was calmly sitting on the ledge, as though fully determined to see the last of me.

I cogitated for full five minutes on this small circumstance. Why should my movements interest a stranger? Why was Mr. Royston so evidently desirous to commence an acquaintanceship? Young men were not in my line; hitherto I had only admired them at a distance; as a general rule, they give a wide berth to women of my age. The little problem at once amused and disturbed me.

I forgot him after a time, and gave myself up to enjoyment. The spring air was so sweet and fresh, the birds' songs so jubilant. The tender and vivid green of the budding hedges seemed to rest one's eyes. By-and-bye the road grew more picturesque; there was an avenue of beeches that led to the village; there were a few trim cottages, and a tiny

green, with an old tree in the midst of it, where some children were playing. I singled out a rosy-cheeked, white-headed urchin and asked him to direct me to The Nook, and he at once pointed with a grimy finger towards the church. "Keep at the back of the church and the Hall, Miss, and walk on till you see a green door in the wall: that's The Nook, sure enough. Pull the bell hard."

These directions were simple enough, and I followed them implicitly. I passed the little grey church, and a small park where some black cattle were browsing, and just beyond was a high blank wall, flanked by two windows, with a narrow green door, and a lamp over it. As I pulled the massive bell with some difficulty and listened to its dull jangle, I could not help thinking that Miss Hillyard was wise in telling me to make inquiries. I should have wandered round and round the village and should never have discovered that this wall belonged to a dwelling-house. The windows were so high up that they would never have attracted my attention, and I should only have imagined that the green door opened into the Hall grounds. I was kept waiting for what seemed to my impatience a considerable

time; but I was not disposed to set the discordant bell jingling again, and by-and-bye I heard footsteps, and a grim-looking elderly woman opened the gate and muttered a sort of apology as she asked me to walk in.

The Nook, regarded from an outside point of view, struck me as a singularly forbidding-looking residence for two girls; but I was agreeably surprised when I found myself in a beautiful little hall, fitted up with carved oaken bookcases and an old-fashioned settle, the polished floor half covered by a Turkey carpet, and stands of ferns and flowering plants in every available corner. My stern-faced guide ushered me stolidly into a pleasant sunny room with a deep bay-window overlooking the garden. It was evidently the morning or living room, and was fitted up more for comfort and use than for outward show. The deep easy-chairs had well-worn cretonne coverings; the carpet and curtains were handsome, but showed signs of age; a semi-grand piano and a grandfather's clock were the most costly objects in the room, with the exception of the well-filled book-shelves, many of the volumes being bound in Russia leather and antique bindings. I was amazed at the number of books; the

table, cabinet, even chairs, were strewn with them; a copy of Dante's "Inferno" was wide open, as though its reader had only just laid it down. There were an easel and some rudimentary sketches in crayon and oils, and a photographic apparatus, while the sweet, subtle scent of Neapolitan violets pervaded the whole room. I stepped up to the window and regarded the outside prospect, which was still more inviting. A small circular lawn, with beds full of spring plants, seemed to slope gently to a belt of shrubs, while some trees shut out any further view. I found afterwards that this was a tiny lime avenue leading to a small inclosed meadow, while another shrubbery-walk, still more secluded, led to a fernery. Everything was in perfect order; not a stray leaf lay on the short, velvety turf, and the newly gravelled paths looked very inviting. I was wondering how long I was to be left to my own meditations, when I heard a soft, melodious whistling in the shrubbery. The next moment Hector lounged lazily into sight, the sunshine glittering on his massive silver collar. A young lady in a grey tweed dress and sailor's hat followed him. Hector was the first to perceive me. The intrusion of a

stranger evidently astonished him: he uttered a low growl, and his rough lean body showed signs of agitation; a nearer inspection, however, satisfied him that I was no dangerous intruder, and he stalked solemnly up to me and regarded me with profound gravity, as though waiting for an introduction.

"A friend, Hector; yes, by all means a friend," observed a laughing voice; and the hound laid his slender nose confidently against my arm. "Hector cannot understand visitors at The Nook," continued the young lady, with an amused look: "he shares my opinion that our house ought to be called The Hermitage. I do not believe," wrinkling up her white forehead, "that, with the exception of the butcher and the baker, we have ever had a morning caller before."

There was a pleasant frankness about this outspoken address that was singularly prepossessing. Muriel Hillyard certainly did not share her sister's uncommon beauty, but she was a very piquante, interesting little person, and most people would have called her exceedingly pretty. Her complexion was of the brunette type; her large dark eyes were very brilliant and expressive, and there was some-

thing very charming in her child-like *naïveté* and low, musical laugh.

"I believe I am speaking to my new pupil?"

"Yes, I am Muriel," tossing her sailor hat on the nearest chair. "Will you sit down, Miss Osborne? there is a very comfortable chair beside you. How do you like Walton?—but you can hardly have seen it yet. Is not the walk to Leylands pretty? Judith and I are so fond of it."

"I have not seen your sister yet."

"No; my mother had one of her bad attacks this morning, and she cannot leave her. You know, of course, what an invalid poor mother is. Sometimes she cannot bear Judith out of her sight; and she has to sit for hours in a darkened room. I wonder how Judith can bear it: it must be so terribly depressing; but of course it tells on her."

"Miss Hillyard certainly looks delicate."

"Yes, she is very thin," with a sigh. "I tell her sometimes that living in this stupid way will make an old woman of her before her time; but she only says the sooner the better."

"I daresay you have a good many friends." I could have bitten my tongue for making such a foolish speech; for Muriel coloured at the

question, and then gave vent to an impatient little laugh and shrugged her shoulders.

"I am not aware of their names. Did I not tell you that visitors were unknown at The Hermitage? How can we have friends when even a strange voice brings on one of mother's nervous attacks? It is very unfortunate," in rather a pettish voice. "I don't suppose any girl of my age has to lead such a quiet life. I feel as though I shall break out one day. I am not like Judith: she is a perfect saint."

I found this confidence a little embarrassing, and, to change the subject, I gently hinted that we should set to work; but Miss Muriel had evidently a will of her own, and she at once negated this suggestion.

"There is no hurry; and we have not made each other's acquaintance yet," she returned decidedly. "I never intended to begin this morning."

"You mean to waste a whole morning?"

"Certainly I do. I am in a mood for idleness. I hope you do not mean to be strict, Miss Osborne. Judith," in a very pointed voice, "gave me a very different impression. Perhaps," with a mischievous glance at me, "you would like to know what Judith said.

If you are very good, and give me my own way for six months, perhaps I may tell you."

"Thank you, Miss Hillyard."

"I am not Miss Hillyard; Judith is that; and I much prefer to be called Muriel. Do you know I generally get my own way when I am really set on a thing? That is why you are here this morning, because I rebelled and talked to our old lawyer; he is such a kind old man; he is like a father to us. I told him it was a shame that I could not play a piece better than a child of twelve, and I insisted that I should either go to school or have a finishing governess. Fancy going to school at eighteen! but I would have done it; and so they were obliged to give way."

"Was your sister so averse to the idea of a governess?"

"Yes, but only on poor mother's account. She has got a fancy, you know, that she cannot see people. That is why you do not take your meals here, because mother would not leave her room if she knew there was anyone in the house. It is a very distressing form of illness," finished Muriel, in her candid way, "for it affects other people's lives so much."

There, it does me good to grumble to someone. Judith always looks so pained when I make discontented remarks that I try to hide my little feelings; but I may grumble to you?" coaxingly; then, without waiting for my answer, "but of course I may; your face tells me so. Now shall we plan to-morrow's work? I will show you my books and drawings, and you shall see what a dunce I am."

As this coincided with my wishes, we were soon cheerfully at work. Muriel proved herself uncommonly docile: she answered all my questions in a straightforward way, and took my suggestions in good part. I found she was exceedingly well read in English literature, and that the basis of a solid useful education had been formed. In some branches she knew more than most young ladies of her age. For example, she had been well grounded in Latin and Euclid; she said her sister had taught her. "Judith is eight years older than I am," she observed; "she is dreadfully old—six-and-twenty—and you have no idea how clever she is. I am only backward as regards accomplishments." I soon discovered that she spoke the truth; many children of twelve played better, and her knowledge of the French

language was sadly limited. She seemed eager to repair these defects, and assured me that she would practise diligently; but her chief desire seemed to be to learn to sketch; she was certainly clever with her pencil, and, though perfectly untaught, had made some pretty little drawings. My suggestion that we should devote an occasional afternoon to rambles with our sketch-books brought such a brilliant rush of colour to her face that I altered my opinion, for she certainly looked beautiful then. "What a delicious idea! and I am so tired of solitary strolls. But are you sure, Miss Osborne, that you can spare the time? I have no right to monopolise your afternoons. Besides, there is the walk; it will tire you dreadfully. If you could only have luncheon with us; but I dare not mention it to Judith, it would only distress her, and, poor dear! she has burdens enough. If I only thought——" But here I checked her: luncheon was out of the question, I told her, and the walk was of no consequence; I was very strong, and thought little of five or six miles. "There must be pretty spots within an easy distance of either Walton or Leylands," I went on. "We will talk to your sister. Perhaps you

could meet me half-way. There will be no difficulty about it." And Muriel looked at once relieved.

At this moment Miss Hillyard entered the room. It struck me then that she had the hushed footstep and subdued voice of one who has long ministered to a nervous invalid. In the clear morning light she looked even more wan and delicate than ever. I noticed that her eyes were somewhat sunken, and that there were dark lines under them; and I was not surprised when Muriel observed, in rather an anxious tone, "Oh, Judith darling, how ill you look! Shall I go up to mother for a little, while you take a turn in the garden?" but Miss Hillyard shook her head.

"No, dear, I could not stay now. I only came down for a moment to speak to Miss Osborne. My poor mother," turning to me, "is suffering more than usual this morning."

"I hope you have a good doctor, Miss Hillyard?"

I saw Muriel dart a peculiar look at her sister; I had no idea what it meant; but Miss Hillyard replied hurriedly—

"We are very fortunate in that respect. There is an excellent medical man at Walton

—indeed, two or three; but we like Dr. Morrison best."

"But you have not sent for him, Judith?" Muriel spoke rather gravely, I thought.

"There was no need. I told you so, you know. I understand how to treat these attacks. You may trust me, Muriel. It would do more harm than good to call in Dr. Morrison. But I must not stay here talking." She glanced at the books, and then at us, with a gentle smile, and left the room, but as the door closed Muriel pushed them away with an impatient gesture.

"Did you ever see anyone look so ill? And she is growing grey, too. Just think of growing grey at six-and-twenty! Is it not unnatural? All this nursing and shut-up life is killing her; and they will let me do nothing; even Rebecca thinks I am too young and lively to be trusted. But they will find out their mistake one day. Now let us go in the garden. When I am in this mood the house seems to oppress me; I long to make a noise or scold somebody; and then I am safer out of doors."

I felt obliged to humour her: it was too soon to try to discipline this wayward young

creature. I accompanied her into the lime avenue, where we spent the rest of the morning, talking on all sorts of desultory subjects. When I took my leave she parted with me with reluctance, and was pleased to tell me that I had done her good.

"It is so nice to have a real idle chat with someone fresh. It is like a breath of moorland air after a hot sultry day. It was almost as good as talking to a girl of my own age: some old people are so dreadfully precise and uninteresting—not that you are old, exactly, but all the same you are not young, you know." And then we shook hands very cordially. She had not closed the green door, and I looked back to smile and wave to her, but she did not notice me: she was standing with her hand on the hound's shaggy head, and seemed lost in deep abstraction. As I turned the corner she was still standing there motionless, with her pretty little head bent, and her eyes fixed upon the ground.

CHAPTER IV.

A WOLF IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING.

A FEW days' acquaintance with Muriel Hillyard soon ripened my first feeling of interest into warmest affection: before the first week had closed, my new pupil had firmly established herself in the softest corner of my heart. No one but an ogre could have resisted those frank, child-like advances, those pretty, imperative ways. If I had found her charming at our first introduction—if her gay *insouciance* and merry laugh even then bewitched me—I was even more ready to acknowledge her fascination when day after day I learned to know her better. Certainly she was not without her faults—indeed, they were more plainly legible than most people's—but she was so affectionate, so sweet-tempered, so full of girlish graces, that it was impossible not to love her. It was touching to see the affection between the sisters; there was something peculiarly protective and tender in Miss Hillyard's

manner when she addressed her. Muriel was evidently her darling and pet—an anxious charge, perhaps, if one could judge from those grave, wistful looks that sometimes rested on her bright face, but still the object of her dearest solicitude, and her chief happiness. That Muriel repaid her sister's devotion was also apparent. As I watched her coaxing ways and the thousand nameless attentions that seemed her daily delight, I did not wonder to see Judith's careworn face relax and brighten.

Before I had spent many mornings at The Nook I found that Muriel could sometimes be grave. Even in those early days I noticed that she was often absent and serious: when I was playing to her her example, instead of watching my fingers on the keys she would be sunk in some day-dream, and if I roused her she would start uneasily and appear confused. More than once I had detected the glimmer of a tear on her eyelid. And yet she did not appear to be unhappy. I was playing to them both one morning—Miss Hillyard had brought in her work, to be sociable, as she said: the music soothed her mother, and she was able to leave her—I was playing with much enjoyment to myself, when I saw Miss Hillyard

cross the room and sit down by the chair where Muriel had ensconced herself.

"What is it, darling?" I heard her say in quite an anxious tone. "Why, you are actually crying, Muriel!"

I do not know what Muriel said in reply, but when I had finished the sonata I ventured to glance round at them. Muriel's face was hidden against her sister's shoulder, and they were holding each other very tightly. The next moment Muriel rose with an unsteady laugh and went to the window. Perhaps she did not want me to see that her eyes were wet, for she stood there for some time. I was struck then with the look of anxious solicitude on Miss Hillyard's face. When Muriel opened the window and stepped out on the lawn, she said, half to herself, "What can it mean? Muriel never cries. I never saw her shed a tear, unless there was grave cause for it. Miss Osborne," turning to me, "I am afraid my child is a little dull. Perhaps she is in need of some amusement. Will you ask her to drive you somewhere this afternoon? Perhaps the primroses are not all over in the Leigh woods—Muriel does so love primroses—and the little change will do her good."

"Why should you not go yourself, Miss Hillyard? It is such a lovely day, and I am sure the drive will be of equal benefit to you." But she shook her head.

"Muriel needs a more cheerful companion. I am afraid she often finds me too quiet. If you have no other engagement, I should be so pleased if you would go." And of course, after that, I consented.

This little episode had occurred about a fortnight after my arrival at Walton, and by that time my acquaintance with my fellow-lodger, Mr. Royston, had made great strides. I soon liked him very much, he was so gentlemanly and pleasant in his manners; and he was kind-hearted, too—for how many young men in his position would have troubled themselves to pay little attentions to a plain, middle-aged woman, a daily governess without connections or fortune? Nevertheless Mr. Royston very soon made it evident that he appreciated my society and meant to cultivate my acquaintance. He very soon persuaded me that it would be sinful extravagance on my part to order the *Morning Post*, when I could always share his *Standard*, and it soon became his daily habit to bring it to my room

about tea-time and linger for a few minutes' chat. I wonder if he knew how those few cheery words brightened my daily life and imparted a comfortable sense of comradeship. I very soon learned to listen to his quick, springy footstep with a sense of pleasure; and as I sat working or reading in my room in the evening, the sound of his piano, or even his light-hearted whistling, made me feel more cheerful. He had very soon found all out about my visits to The Nook; and though he was far too well-bred to manifest any impertinent curiosity, I noticed that any remark about Leylands seemed to interest him, and before very long I discovered that the name had some subtle charm for him; no matter from what point our conversation started—from Gladstone, or the search for Emin Pasha—we invariably landed at Leylands. After a time, when we became more intimate, he told me a great deal about himself.

He had come in from tennis one evening, and was still in his Joseph's coat, as I called it—a gorgeous garment striped like a tiger-skin, in which he looked still more like a Roman. I had called him in to give him a cup of tea, and he had accepted it with much gratitude.

He always told me that my tea was the best he had ever tasted; and the little compliment had pleased me.

I do not know why our conversation became a little grave that evening, but I remember telling him how lonely I felt sometimes. He listened sympathetically, and his eyes looked at me very kindly, and then he said, rather abruptly—

“I should be in much the same case if it were not for Uncle Calvert: we are both of us miserable orphans, Miss Osborne,” with a little gleam of fun in his eyes. “I lost my parents when I was very young. I have always lived with my uncle. He is such a good fellow! Do you know, he is only fifteen years older than I. He was a young man, not more than one-and-twenty, when they died. My grandmother was living then. I looked upon Uncle Calvert as a sort of playfellow in those days. I remember the games we had, and how he used to take me with him wherever he went, and how people would ask him after his little brother. Well, he is older and graver now, but we still have rare sport together when I go home.”

“You live in London?”

"Yes. My uncle is a barrister; he lives in Onslow Square. His name is Grenfell: he was my mother's brother. Would you like to see his photo?" He darted out of the room, without waiting for my answer, and returned with it a moment later.

I studied it with much interest. It was a fine, intellectual face, not handsome, but of singular power and attraction; it belonged evidently to a man in the prime of life and in the full force of his energy; there was mingled strength and kindness in the eyes and the broad ample brow. On the whole, I had never seen a face that pleased me better. Mr. Royston flushed in quite a boyish manner when I said this.

"Dear old fellow! he is good every inch of him," he said, in an enthusiastic way.

"I suppose Mr. Grenfell is married?" But, to my surprise, Mr. Royston shook his head.

"I wish he were! No man living ever deserved a wife more; but"—looking exceedingly grave—"he has been jilted. I don't know the rights of it. It was not so many years ago: I was at Oxford when it happened, and I never even knew the girl's name. I found him awfully changed when I got back. I

never saw a man so cut up. Not that he said so—he hardly even alluded to it. ‘I have had a blow, my boy,’ he said once when I bothered him, ‘but it never mends matters to set up a howl over them. I meant to have got married like the rest of the world, but she has changed her mind, that is all.’ And he never said another word about it; but he has not been the same since. Poor old man! it has gone hard with him, I know. If only I could speak my mind to that girl!” And here Mr. Royston’s eyes flashed: my young Roman had plenty of spirit in him; I should pity any woman who dared to play him false.

Muriel and I had begun our sketching expeditions. Miss Hillyard had demurred a little at first; she said it was taking an unfair advantage of my good-nature and robbing me of my leisure; but I soon undeceived her on this point; I enjoyed myself quite as much as Muriel did. I loved to be in the open air, I was fond of sketching, and I liked the society of my young companion. When Miss Hillyard found I was in earnest, she withdrew her opposition, and delighted in stocking a little basket with delicacies for our refreshment. What interest Mousquetaire took in that bas-

ket! He now came invariably with me to the house in the mornings, and, as Hector treated him from the first with a sort of contemptuous tolerance, my wee doggie led a very happy life indeed.

Our first afternoon had been successful in every way. On the second a curious thing happened. We were some distance from Leylands, and were trying to do justice to a picturesque group of cottages with some beech-trees behind them and a delicious bit of ivy-draped wall, when Mousquetaire uttered a friendly bark, and Mr. Royston passed, walking very slowly. I looked up and nodded to him, and he at once paused, as though he expected me to speak to him. Glancing at Muriel, I saw that her head was bent very low over her sketch; she seemed intent on her work: so I smiled and made signs that he must not disturb us, and he at once took the hint and walked on; but I thought he looked disappointed, and in the evening he hinted in a grumbling sort of way at the exclusiveness of English manners.

"Come, come, Mr. Royston," I said, for I perfectly understood him, "I am sure you know one Englishwoman who has no nonsense.

of that sort. But I was in office this afternoon, remember; my pupil was beside me, so only a nod and smile were permissible. Do you suppose any woman in my responsible position would allow herself to bandy words with a young man? What would Miss Hillyard have said if I had permitted such a wolf in sheep's clothing to be brought into contact with her sister?"

"I should not have hurt either of you," he said, a little sulkily; "and the country is different from London."

"Human nature is the same everywhere," I returned, drily, "for even pattern young men have to be kept in order sometimes. Besides, under the present circumstances I am bound to be especially wary: the Miss Hillyards hold themselves aloof from everybody."

"But why?" he asked, eagerly. "Do you know, people tell me—of course there is plenty of gossip in these small places—everyone knows everybody's else's business, so I have heard about these ladies—people say that they live like nuns and that no one ever visits at The Nook? Do you know the reason? Excuse me if I seem inquisitive, but it does appear so incredible; two such beautiful girls, too."

"Mrs. Hillyard has such dreadful health."

"Do you believe that is the only reason?" he returned, in such a peculiar tone that I looked at him in surprise. "Could any mother not utterly selfish condemn that young creature—creatures, I mean—to such an unnatural life? It is monstrous! it is not life at all; it—you must see it yourself, Miss Osborne; I am sure you must be grieved for them. Just think! you are the only lady, besides the vicar's wife, who has ever been inside The Nook, and I believe she has only been once; her reception certainly did not induce her to repeat her visit."

"The vicar's wife?"

"Yes; Mrs. Mostyn, up at Leyland Hall. I know her slightly; she is a very pleasant woman. She quite raved about the elder Miss Hillyard's beauty, but she said she was the proudest and most repellent person she had ever seen; that she was made to feel, in a civil sort of way, that her visit was unexpected and by no means desired. She gave me a graphic account of it. The second Miss Hillyard—your pupil—never made her appearance at all; but she has seen her running in and out of

the cottages and evidently quite friendly with the inmates."

"I think after your account you will fully exonerate me from unfriendliness this afternoon, Mr. Royston." But at this he turned a little obstinate.

"That was altogether different. I don't see why Miss Hillyard—your pupil, I mean—need be held responsible for her sister's *hauteur*. What would a few words spoken on the high-road have mattered to anyone? Like many other women, you are over-scrupulous." And with that he went off; but I did not hear him whistle for the remainder of the evening. My pattern young man certainly had a temper.

I thought he would have given us a wide berth after that, but somehow we were always meeting him; he never lingered or seemed to expect me to address him, but walked straight on in a business-like way. When he took off his hat to us, Muriel bowed very gravely, but she always flushed a little, as though she were aware that we were followed.

When this had gone on for a little, I determined to lecture him severely, and I opened

the subject by asking him in a sarcastic voice if he had left off playing tennis.

"By no means," he replied, undaunted by this; "but I was always a great walker: Uncle Calvert would tell you that." And then, reading mischief in my eyes, he added coolly, "I believe the Leigh woods and Wimborne are not private property, and the high-road is broad enough to hold more than two people." And, seeing him in this dangerous mood and only too ready to show fight, I adroitly changed the subject, to his manifest triumph.

"After all," I said to myself, "young men will be young men, and a pretty face will lure them to the world's end. What is the good of going against nature, you silly woman? If Mr. Royston admires your pupil, what business is that of yours, as long as you permit no attempt on his part to secure an introduction? On that point you must be firm; the line must be drawn there." And this mental resolve pacified me.

After all, he had other opportunities. What deep creatures men are! I was led to this remark one Sunday evening. Muriel had once asked me to come to their little church—"it is such a nice service for a village, and Mr. Mos-

tyn preaches so beautifully," she added coaxingly.

Acting on this hint I walked over one evening, and as I took my place behind Muriel and her sister I saw Mr. Royston in a pew near us. I thought he looked rather shamefaced, as though he were found out, but I took no apparent notice of him. When the service had ended, he waited in his place until Miss Hilliard and Muriel had passed, and then he followed them closely. I lingered for a few minutes to inspect the little church. When I came out he was walking rapidly down the road before me. What had he been doing with himself all that time? He certainly had not waited to offer me his escort, because, though he turned his head and saw me following him up the beech avenue, he did not attempt to join me, but walked on as though for a wager, and I did not see him again that night.

CHAPTER V.

A LATE VISITOR.

A MONTH had passed in this manner tranquilly and happily. After that Sunday evening I carefully refrained from any further attendance at the little church at Leylands: Mr. Royston need not fear that I should be a spy upon his movements. Nevertheless I was well aware that he never missed the evening service.

One morning as Muriel and I were reading French together, Miss Hillyard came into the room a little hurriedly. I thought she looked nervous.

"May I venture to interrupt you?" she asked in rather a deprecating voice. Muriel, will you spare Miss Osborne for a few minutes? Mother wishes to see her." Muriel opened her eyes very widely at this. I think she was as surprised as I was at this announcement. "Mother?" she repeated in an incredulous tone; but Miss Hillyard hardly glanced at her.

"My mother cannot talk much, she continued," addressing me; "she will not detain you long, if you will be kind enough to follow me." I rose at once, and for the first time ascended the staircase. The steps were low and broad, and the carved balustrades were dark with age. I heard afterwards that The Nook had once been a dower-house, and that many a generation of elderly Mostyns had ended their peaceful existence there. No doubt this accounted for the taste and air of finish that stamped the interior of The Nook.

When we reached the landing Miss Hillyard paused, and I again noticed that she seemed extremely nervous.

"I daresay you are used to invalids, Miss Osborne," she said, looking at me anxiously. "If my mother seems a little abrupt or strange, I am sure you will be kind enough to take no notice; her illness is of the nerves, and we are sometimes obliged to humour her." She drew back the curtain that hung before a door as she spoke, and signed to me to enter. I found myself in a large, handsomely furnished room, with two windows overlooking the garden, the apartment evidently serving as a sitting-room as well as a bedroom.

The Venetian blinds of one window had been closed to exclude the May sunshine, and a tall Indian screen had been drawn around the easy-chair where the invalid sat. It was not until I was within a few feet of her that I had any clear perception of her features, but the first sight of Mrs. Hillyard was a shock to me. As she held out a cold, trembling hand and touched mine, I thought that if it were not for her eyes I might be looking at the face of a dead woman. Her very resemblance to her daughter seemed to heighten the ghastly effect: a Judith stricken with age and palsy might have sat in that chair. Even the first glance told me that Judith's beauty had been inherited from her mother; nothing could be finer than the features, and the dark, sunken eyes had no doubt once been brilliant with the light of youth. I had seen many sufferers in my life, and had held more than one dying hand, but never had I looked upon a more pitious wreck of mind and body.

"She looks kind, Judith," she whispered, drawing her hand away, however, in rather a frightened manner as she felt my warm touch. "You are right; she has a true face."

"Yes, dear," soothingly, as though she were

speaking to a child; but she looked at me as though entreating my forbearance. "You know you can trust me, mother. I am never mistaken in a face; I was sure Miss Osborne would prove a good friend to us all. You have grown very fond of Muriel, have you not?" appealing to me; but Mrs. Hillyard interrupted her somewnat fretfully:

"What do we want with friends, Judith? Only people who are happy can afford to indulge in such luxuries. We have each other and Rebecca. We have given up the world, you know, before it has given us up."

"Hush, dearest mother," laying her thin hand on the invalid's shoulder. "What will Miss Osborne think if you talk so wildly?"

"Ah! that is just it. what will she think, Judith?" And the frightened look deepened in her eyes. "You are terribly incautious; all young people are. You promised me that we should be quite quiet here. Muriel is only a child. What does she want with a finishing governess? In my time girls were content with a good solid education."

"Muriel is eighteen, mother."

"Eighteen? Nonsense! you must have made a mistake. I was married at that

age." A new fear, evolved from her sick fancies, seemed to disturb her. "Judith, have you told this lady that young men are not allowed here? Have you asked her to keep strict watch over the child? Muriel must not be allowed to make acquaintance with any gentleman, or evil will come of it, as it did in your case, Jue."

Miss Hillyard turned suddenly very pale; then she stooped and whispered some remonstrance into her mother's ear, but the invalid listened to her with a sort of childish fretfulness.

"Why did you let her come up, then?" she returned peevishly. "You know I dislike strangers and never know what to say to them. It is quite your own fault, Judith."

I saw a weary, despairing look pass over Miss Hillyard's face; then she turned to me, and with her usual air of gentle courtesy begged me to take my leave, as the interview evidently fatigued her mother.

I thought Mrs. Hillyard seemed a little sullen at her daughter's rebuke; for she did not again give me her hand. "It is all Judith's fault. She spoils that child," we heard her say as we left the room. Miss Hillyard paused on the threshold.

"Please do not mind anything she has said," she whispered. "The sight of a stranger always bewilders her; when we are alone she is much calmer. Strangers seem to have a disturbing influence. She has had a great shock; the doctor says it will be years before she recovers from it." Just then a fretful call sounded from the room, and she motioned me to go quickly. The door was still ajar—perhaps in her haste Miss Hillyard had forgotten to shut it—and as I went downstairs I could hear the invalid's querulous tones: "It has done me harm, Judith; I tell you it has done me harm. Everything hurts me, and I shall have another attack to-night. Why did you let her come up? I have said something I ought not to have said, and it is all your fault—all your fault." And then the door closed.

Muriel looked at me inquisitively as I re-entered the room. "You have not been long," she remarked. "What do you think of poor mother? Does she not look very, very ill?"

I answered in the affirmative, but I could not be induced to repeat her mother's conversation, and I could see that my reserve somewhat disappointed Muriel: she wanted to know my impressions.

"I wonder why she wished to see you," she continued, in a dissatisfied tone. "She has never asked for any one before. It seems so very strange."

"Perhaps your sister can tell you that."

"Judith never tells me anything, or Rebecca either; they all persist, even mother, in treating me like a child; but they will find out their mistake some day. I am no child." She threw up her pretty little head, and her long neck curved like a swan's, and there was a naughty sparkle in her eyes. "Perhaps they thought you were not strict enough for a duenna, Miss Osborne, so they determined to lecture you in private," continued the young lady. "I declare I begin to feel like an imprisoned princess—like that king's daughter, for example, who was shut up in a brazen tower—only in fairy-tales it always ends so happily."

"To be sure; there is always a prince in those stories," I returned coolly. My remark seemed to take Muriel aback; she blushed violently, and then pointed out the lateness of the hour, as though she were anxious to get rid of me, and I took the hint at once.

But I never enjoyed my homeward walk less,

and even the soft lights and shadows that flecked my favourite beech avenue only raised momentary admiration. A grave, weary face, with dark, miserable eyes, seemed to come between me and the sunlight—a haunting face worn with some strange secret pain. Was Mrs. Hillyard's mind disordered, or had weakness and grief only bewildered it, as her daughter had said? Good heavens! what a life for a girl of six-and-twenty, to minister to this diseased mind! Was it any marvel that Judith's cheek had grown so thin that she habitually wore that expression of hopeless gentle patience? How long, her sad eyes seemed to ask—how long must she carry this daily cross? Alas! what could have caused this dreadful illness? A shock; but it could have been no light shock. I was so lost in these thoughts that I never noticed that I had reached my own gate and that Mr. Royston and another gentleman were just coming out. I believe I should have passed them without looking up, only Mr. Royston's laugh recalled me. "Do you know that you are passing your own door?" he observed in a quizzical tone. Then, as I looked rather foolish, he continued: "It was cruel of me to disturb such profound meditation, but I

particularly wished to introduce my uncle to you."

So this was his uncle Calvert. I should have recognized Mr. Grenfell in a moment without any introduction; the same thoughtful, intelligent face that I had seen in the photograph was looking at me now with a pleasant smile.

"I have heard a great deal of Miss Osborne. I am glad my nephew has such a kind neighbour," he said as we shook hands.

"We have formed a sort of mutual improvement society," interposed Mr. Royston gaily. "Miss Osborne gives me tea—such tea, Uncle Calvert! Old Dorothy's is not to be compared to it—and I contribute a vast amount of useful conversation: so we are quits."

"Are you going away, Mr. Royston?" with an inquiring glance at the gladstone bag he carried.

"Yes; I have just got an exeat, and am going to run up to London for two days."

"I think we ought to be off now, Bryan, or we shall be late for the train," interposed Mr. Grenfell; and then they took leave of me.

I watched them for a moment. They were both tall men, and I noticed Mr. Grenfell had

the same fine carriage of the head and shoulders that distinguished his nephew. He was not handsome, certainly; but he had the sort of face that it is impossible to forget. I fancied that his manner was habitually grave.

The house felt a little dull without Mr. Royston; there were no snatches of piano-playing, no whistling, no springing footsteps on the staircase, no tap at my door when the tea-tray made its appearance. To make matters worse, it was a wet evening: torrents of rain fell and beat drearily against the window-panes, as though lashed by an angry wind. As I sat by my snug fire and listened to the storm without, an unusual restlessness oppressed me; perhaps my interview with Mrs. Hillyard had had a depressing influence; but in spite of all my efforts to fix my attention on my book, I found my thoughts travelling back to *The Nook*: Judith's careworn face came between me and the page and hindered all enjoyment.

I had sunk into a deep revery, when I heard the gate close, and a minute afterwards the door-bell rang. Who could have ventured out on such a wild night? Probably one of the masters had come for an hour's smoke and chat with Mr. Royston: he seemed a great

favourite with them all, and generally one or other of his friends invaded his evening solitude. I heard Miss Trotter's voice raised in shrill remonstrance; then there was a hurried tap at my door, and Judith's pale face appeared in the doorway.

I sprang from my chair with an exclamation of surprise. "My dear Miss Hillyard, how imprudent, how excessively wrong, to come out on such an evening! You are wet; your cloak is soaking!" But she motioned me back.

"Please don't touch me. Of course I must be wet: it has rained heavily all the time. Poor Hector is wet too. Do you think Miss Trotter will mind him lying on the door-mat? I could not leave him outside."

"He shall come in and dry himself at my fire. He will not hurt my old rug."

Then, as she thanked me and took off her long waterproof cloak, I stirred up the fire and drew up the easy-chair. Hector looked at me gratefully as he shook himself and lay down in the warmest corner—a proceeding that Mousquetaire evidently resented, for he at once curled himself up on the couch and sulked for the remainder of the evening.

Miss Hillyard followed me. She sat down somewhat silently, and stretched out her thin hands to the fire, as though the warmth was pleasant to her. I thought she looked paler than usual, and though she did not speak she glanced at me once or twice rather nervously. To put her at her ease, I said cheerfully:

"A visitor is an unexpected pleasure this evening: it was rather dull work listening to the rain, and for once in my life I found my own company somewhat irksome."

"I was envying you as I came in," she returned somewhat sadly. "You looked so content sitting by your peaceful fireside while other people were battling with the wind and rain."

"Other people ought to have remained by their fireside too," was my pointed rejoinder to this, but the little rebuke passed unheeded.

"Miss Osborne," she said hurriedly, "you are very kind. You are the sort of person that one can trust. I have come out to-night to ask you a favour—a great favour. I am in a little perplexity, and the worst of it is that I cannot explain things. I know Miss Trotter has another room—there will be no difficulty about that; but would it trouble you very

much if Muriel were to come here for two or three days?"

"Come here—stay with me, do you mean?"

"Yes. Of course she could not be here alone, but with you she would be safe—quite safe. There is no one else of whom I could ask such a favour; but Muriel is so fond of you, you have already proved yourself such a kind friend to us both, that I have ventured to ask this."

"My dear Miss Hillyard, I shall be delighted. You will be conferring a favour on me by allowing me to enjoy your sister's society. When do you wish her to come? Any day will be the same to me. This is not The Nook, but I will promise to make her as comfortable as the house will allow."

"I do not doubt her comfort. Thank you so much, Miss Osborne! May she come to you to-morrow morning? It will be only for a day or two, but her room is wanted, and there are reasons," with a painful return of nervousness.

A quick thought darted into my mind. Mr. Royston—he was away now, but he would surely be back on Monday. How was I to speak of him without betraying his unspoken confidence? Miss Hillyard knew that one of

the masters lived in the house; more than once I had mentioned his name. I remembered telling her one day that we were great friends.

Perhaps she saw my embarrassment, for she asked me rather quickly if Muriel would inconvenience me in any way.

"No; it is not that," I replied. "I shall be too delighted to have her. I was only wondering what I was to do about Mr. Royston. He has gone up to London to-day, but he will be back in a day or two. He has got into the habit of coming to my room for a chat or a cup of tea; and I shall find it difficult to turn him out."

I could see that this was an unexpected difficulty. A slight frown contracted her forehead; she seemed at a loss how to answer me.

"Perhaps I might give him a hint," I suggested, "that while Muriel is with me his visits will not be as welcome as usual. He is very observant; I should think the merest hint would suffice." By which speech I showed a pitiful ignorance of the ways of young men. Mr. Royston might be observant: but what if he did not choose to take the hint? Bessie Osborne, after all, you are a very foolish woman!

Miss Hillyard looked very much relieved when I said this. Her puckered brow smoothed again.

"If you will be so extremely kind—if you will be good enough to give this hint to Mr. Royston, I shall feel more comfortable. Muriel is very young, and we are anxious for her not to form any new acquaintance at present. I hope you will not find the charge too difficult; but it is only for a day or two."

"Yes, and Mr. Royston will be away until Monday."

"In that case it will not matter in the least. I shall not ask you to keep her beyond Monday or Tuesday—perhaps Tuesday. I am very glad things have happened so. And now thank you again. You have taken a load off my mind." And she smiled at me gratefully as she rose.

"You are not going yet?"

"Yes, indeed. Do you know how late it is? But I am thankful to hear the rain is falling less heavily. Come, Hector, old fellow, we must tramp through the mud again."

I knew that it was useless to say a dissuading word. The dog was certainly a protection on that lonely road, but it troubled me to see

that delicate young creature—for she was young, after all—expose herself to the inclement weather. When I opened the door the rush of damp air seemed to chill one; and though Miss Hillyard was right and the rain had somewhat abated, there was still a steady, quiet down-pour that threatened to last for hours.

My lips were sealed, but I think she saw the pitying disapproval in my face, for as she drew the hood of her cloak over her head she suddenly bent forward with a sort of impulse and kissed me.

“Do not look so sorry,” she said gently. “Hector will take care of me; and I was obliged to come in spite of the rain. Go in and warm yourself, dear Miss Osborne.”

But I did nothing of the kind; on the contrary, I went down to the gate and stood by the dripping hedge and watched her out of sight. How weird it looked, that slender, hooded figure walking so swiftly under the black skies, with the hound stalking solemnly beside her! Had she no fear of that dark, long road? How I wished Mr. Royston were at home, that he might follow her even at a distance!

I went back to the house with a vague uneasiness stirring in my mind. I was a very scrupulous person, and I felt as though I were deceiving Miss Hillyard—as though I had only given her a half-confidence. What would she have said if she knew how Mr. Royston haunted Leylands—how he made it his daily object to track our movements? Would she have intrusted Muriel to my care if she had known this? But I quieted my scruples by telling myself that Mr. Royston would not be back until Monday. After all, the risk was slight; I would take care to be out all that afternoon, and perhaps by Tuesday she would have returned to The Nook. When my mind was clear on this point I called in Miss Trotter and gave her instructions about preparing a room for my young guest. It seemed to me as though she were unduly surprised at the news: her sentences became involved and gave me a good deal of trouble to disentangle any sort of meaning from them.

"Dear me—one of the Miss Hillyards!" she kept repeating. "What an unexpected circumstance!" And she kept up this running fire of astonished comment until I dismissed her.

CHAPTER VI.

THE LANGUAGE OF FLOWERS.

THE next morning Muriel drove up in the pony-carriage. She was evidently in a state of suppressed excitement, of which wonder seemed the predominant feature, and which she carefully repressed until Miss Trotter was out of hearing.

"What does it mean?" she observed, in a perplexed voice, as she took off her hat. "I never knew Judith so mysterious, so altogether provoking and tiresome: she goes about the house looking like a ghost and refusing to open her lips. It is almost enough to drive one crazy. Some gentleman is coming down on business—that is all she tells me, and my room is wanted."

"My dear Muriel," I interposed, soothingly, "that is surely sufficient reason to satisfy any reasonable person. Do you mind so very much giving up your room for a night or two?"

"Not in the least," she returned promptly. "I am only too delighted to get away from The Nook for a few hours. One may love one's home and yet have too much of it."

"Then why do you look so discomposed?" For she certainly seemed vexed and a little perturbed.

"Well, I will tell you," after a moment's hesitation, during which her forehead seemed a mass of wrinkles, so that her pretty brown hair nearly touched her eyebrows. "I hate mysteries!" bringing out the words with such force and suddenness that Mousquetaire jumped up and licked her face.

"But if there be no mystery," I returned, coolly, "if your sister really wants your room——" But she interrupted me.

"Why can she not put the man, whoever he is, into the spare-room? What does it matter if it is dismantled? Rebecca and the girl would soon make it comfortable. I would have slept in it myself; it would have been a change; I should have felt like the Vicar of Wakefield migrating from the blue bed to the brown," continued Muriel with a little humour. "But Judith would not hear of it; she declared the room was damp. But of course I knew

what she meant; it is the old story: I am too young to be trusted, so I am to be sent out of the way."

What could I say? In my heart I agreed with her, but it would never do to let her think so; but in another minute her mood changed: she laughed, winked away a suspicious moisture that was gathering in her bright eyes, and kissed me affectionately.

"Don't look so worried, you dear thing! I have no right to air my little troubles in this way. Judith may be as mysterious as she likes, and I do not mean to vex myself any more about her. We will have a good time together, and I intend to enjoy myself tremendously."

She seemed her bright self after this, though she had another grave fit before the morning was over. I wondered if it had anything to do with a casual remark that I made about Mr. Royston's absence, and which she received with complete silence; but her face gave me no clue, and a few minutes afterwards she proposed a sketching expedition for the afternoon.

We spent Sunday quietly, and went to the parish church. I was afraid my young companion attracted a great deal of notice; she

was certainly pretty, and there was something so fresh and piquante about her whole appearance that I was not surprised to see that the younger members of the congregation looked at her rather curiously.

On Monday morning, as we were at breakfast, a note was brought to me by a boy. It was from Miss Hillyard, and was evidently written in great haste. She had some troublesome business to settle, and she begged me to keep Muriel a little longer. "I am afraid you will think me very unceremonious, dear Miss Osborne," she wrote, "but I am placed in a very difficult position. Will you let Muriel stay with you for two or three days longer? When I am ready for her I will drive over and fetch her myself, and then I shall have an opportunity of thanking you for your kindness."

I had expected a return of Muriel's petulance when I acquainted her with the contents of her sister's note, but to my surprise she looked excessively pleased.

"I do like staying with you so much!" she said in her most winning way; "and you don't want to get rid of me, do you?" But though I could truthfully assure her of this,

my pleasure in her society was a little dashed by the idea of my responsibility. I could only plan sketching expeditions that should keep us out the whole afternoon: if Mr. Royston missed his afternoon tea he must endure his disappointment.

It is strange how one's plans are frustrated: that very afternoon we were detained in-doors by a settled drizzling rain; when Miss Trotter brought in the tea-things she lighted the fire, just to keep the damp out, as she said, and make up for the want of sunshine, and, as I dearly loved the cheerful blaze, I made no objection. Muriel curled herself up on the rug at once; she said that it made her feel more at home; she told me that she often spent the whole evening in that position with her head in Judith's lap, either reading or talking. "It is dreadfully idle, but it is so comfortable," she added with a sigh, as though she were missing that dearly loved sister.

Just then I heard the gate close with a bang, and the next moment the latch-key turned with the well-known click. I think Muriel heard it too, for the cheek that was farthest from the fire became very pink.

Of course it was Mr. Royston: no one else

would throw down his gladstone bag with such a thud, or race upstairs three steps at a time. Before I could recover my breath or think what was to be done, he was down again and rapping at my door. Muriel started. "Who is it?" she asked, a little fearfully; but of course she knew who it was. But Mr. Royston was evidently taken by surprise: he stood in the doorway as if he were petrified when he saw the girlish figure on the hearth-rug.

"Well, come in," I said a little pettishly, for the difficulty of the position put me out of temper, and I was even inclined to quarrel with Judith and her mysteries. "I suppose you want a cup of tea after your journey, Mr. Royston. You see I have my pupil with me—Miss Hillyard, this is my fellow-lodger, Mr. Royston."

"Yes, I know," she answered, in a very low voice, as she gave him her hand without looking at him. As for Mr. Royston, the flash of joy that came into his eyes would have betrayed his secret to the most casual observer. For the moment he was incapable of a word.

Muriel certainly did not help him out of his embarrassment. She came round to my side very silently, and seemed absorbed in my

movements: even when Mr. Royston placed himself opposite to her she did not seem inclined to look at him and address him, and the whole burden of the conversation fell on me.

I was rather partial to young men, at least when they were clever and amusing, but I felt that afternoon that I could cheerfully have dispensed with Mr. Royston's society. He did not seem to notice my stiffness and want of cordiality; he was very absent, and answered my remarks in rather a random manner, as though his thoughts were otherwise engaged. Perhaps the pretty, blushing face opposite him was a little too distracting, or very likely he wished that he could induce its owner to take some part in the conversation.

He addressed her at last: "Did you and Miss Osborne attend evening service at Leylands, Miss Hillyard?"

"No," she returned, with unusual shyness—Muriel was not a shy person—"we went to the parish church."

"Indeed!" fixing his eyes on her.

"One likes a change sometimes," she returned, plucking up a little of her old spirit; "one gets so tired of doing the same things day after day!"

"And of seeing the same faces," in rather a peculiar tone.

"Miss Osborne," observed Muriel, "Mousquetaire is begging for his tea, and you are taking no notice of him. May I give him some sponge-cake?" Muriel's cheeks wore a deeper pink as she spoke, and I think she was trying to hide a smile.

I confess my feelings were not altogether pleasant. Those two young people evidently understood each other. Had Mr. Royston ever spoken to her before? There was something in his manner that made me uneasy; the same quiet power that was stamped on his uncle's face was visible on his; in spite of his youth, he was a man who would be likely to hew his way through every obstacle.

So he stayed on now, without taking any notice of my hints, though I tried hard to get rid of him. Muriel told me afterwards that I had been extremely rude to him; we were sitting in the dusk, and she was on the rug at my feet again. "Do you always treat your guests so ungraciously?" she asked, with a fine assumption of innocence, as though the naughty child did not know that I had sat on thorns for two hours, for Mr. Royston certainly

stayed quite that time. "I was very sorry for the poor man once or twice when you took him up so sharply."

"Mr. Royston had no right to say so long when I showed him so plainly that I wished him to go. I never saw him so inconsiderate before."

"Really?" with a drawl; for even Muriel could be provoking sometimes. I determined to punish her promptly.

"I think you might have seconded me," I returned rather severely. "Mr. Royston would not have stayed so long if you had not questioned him so closely about his visit to the Engadine." For after a time Muriel had thrown off her shyness and had shown a willingness to converse on any or every subject. But my reproof fell harmlessly.

"Of course one likes to have one's questions answered," she returned calmly, "and I was always so anxious for information about the Engadine. I mean to go there myself one day. Mr. Royston has promised to lend me his Baedeker; and he has some lovely photographs, too."

"Muriel," I observed, a little too abruptly—but really these young people had been ter-

ribly trying—"I cannot allow you to form any acquaintance with Mr. Royston while you are under my care. You know your sister would not wish it."

For a moment I thought she was going to be very angry; her face darkened, and she seemed on the point of breaking out into an indignant remonstrance; then she turned very pale and her eyelids drooped.

"Very well," was all her reply.

My severity softened in a moment.

"You know, my dear," I continued more gently, "that I would not hurt you for the world, or Mr. Royston either; he is a great favourite of mine. But I am in rather an onerous position. Your sister tells me plainly that she wishes you to form no new acquaintance at present, and Mr. Royston is only like other young men—he likes to be civil and pay attention to a pretty girl; they all do; but while you are my guest it is impossible for me to encourage his visits. Are you sure that you do not misunderstand me?"

"It is very easy to understand," she returned a little proudly. "You are stating it with sufficient plainness."

"And you will own I am right?"

“From your own point of view, I daresay you are right.” And she could not be induced to say another word on the subject. She was not quite like herself all the evening, though from the way she kissed me when she said good-night I could see she bore me no malice for my plain speaking.

I wished that I could be more lenient with them both. After all, Mr. Royston was a gentleman and in a fairly good position; besides his mastership he had two hundred a year of his own, and doubtless his uncle would leave him his money. Was it not the most natural thing in the world that he should have fallen in love with this charming girl? How I wished that I could help and not thwart him! I was too soft-hearted for the character I had to play; if they had only known it, they had my best wishes and sympathy.

Muriel seemed quite herself when we met at breakfast; the morning passed pleasantly, and she made no objection when I proposed taking our sketch-books to Farnborough, a village some three miles off. It was six o'clock when we returned, and we found the dreaded visitor had called during our absence: the table was strewn with photograph-books,

and Baedeker occupied a prominent position. We saw nothing of Mr. Royston that night, and Muriel spent the evening in poring over the photograph-albums and studying Baedeker.

I congratulated myself on my successful ruse, and the next afternoon I suggested another expedition. I thought Muriel acceded a little reluctantly this time; she was tired of sketching, she said, with a touch of petulance; but when I persisted she shrugged her shoulders and offered no further opposition; but I had rather a silent companion that afternoon. Nothing went right—Muriel was inattentive to my instructions and spoiled her sketch; then she got cross and refused to touch her pencil again—she would rather sit and watch me. I found the silence irksome; Muriel's girlish spleen seemed to spoil the sunshine; nevertheless I worked on steadily until I felt that it would be safe to return. This time a beautiful bouquet greeted our eyes as we entered the room. At the sight of the flowers Muriel's ill-humour vanished. Her sister, too, had sent quite a hamper of good things—chickens, new-laid eggs, and cream, and cakes.

"Evidently Judith thinks you will starve

me," observed Muriel, with her old merry smile. "Rebecca has made these cakes. She is a famous cook."

A note had accompanied the hamper, but there was no word of recall. Muriel did not seem to expect it; she only remarked that she felt quite settled and at home.

From that day Mr. Royston was in my good graces; he behaved admirably. Perhaps, after all, he had taken my hints, for though the weather obliged us to stay in-doors the two following afternoons we saw nothing of him, and only heard the sound of his piano through the closed doors. That he was mindful of us was equally evident, as each morning a vase of lovely flowers, the choicest productions of Covent Garden, found a place on the breakfast-table: it had no address; the lid was open, and the flowers were there ready to our hand. "They are very beautiful. Did you ever see such roses?" I said, once. "I wonder if they are for you or me, Muriel?"

"For you, of course," she returned, giving the box a little push, but there was a mischievous sparkle in her eyes. Of course the little puss knew they were for her, though as she filled the vases and made dainty little breast-

knots for us both she still persisted in calling them mine.

"Why don't you go and thank him?" she said, as she touched the buds lovingly. "You don't deserve to have such kind friends. When people send you lovely hot-house flowers that must have cost a great deal of money, you ought to say thank you, surely."

Muriel's words were only a re-echo of my own thoughts. When the third box of flowers made its appearance I left the room at once and tapped at Mr. Royston's door. He was just finishing his breakfast. When he saw me he looked a little conscious, and a dusky red came to his cheek.

"I thought you had made up your mind not to speak to me again," he said, shaking hands, though, with his usual heartiness.

"Nonsense!" was my blunt answer; "you thought nothing of the kind; but all the same I have come to scold you. Mr. Royston, how can you reconcile such extravagance with your conscience? Do you know my room is a perfect bower of roses?"

"How can I know anything of the kind," he returned coolly, "when your door has been so inhospitably closed to me?"

"It is only closed to you while my pupil remains under my care. Come, Mr. Royston, you shall not pretend to misunderstand an old friend: you know my reason as well as I do myself. But I cannot and will not have you waste your money in this absurd fashion."

"How are you to help it?" he replied nonchalantly. "If you and Miss Hillyard object to my flowers, you can just pitch them out of the window."

Of course it was no good arguing with him; I saw that he meant to continue his floral persecution.

"Yes," he continued, as though he read my thoughts, "I am deaf to remonstrances, impervious to rebukes; nevertheless, I am open to bribes—an invitation to tea, for example, or——" Then, catching sight of my face, "Poor Miss Osborne, it is a shame to tease you when you are so dreadfully in earnest. You are not quite cut out for this *rôle*, are you? It is quite aging you. Well, I cannot undertake to be a good boy, but I will promise to keep off the premises until the magical hour of afternoon is over: so please do not keep your poor pupil out of doors until she is ready to drop with fatigue. Come, you may trust me as far

as that, but no farther," rather under his voice, but I heard him. We parted with this understanding, and I was relieved to see that he bore me no grudge for my want of hospitality. The flowers came regularly, and Muriel was never without her favourite breast-knot of roses. I am afraid Mr. Royston saw them as he passed to and fro to his work. Occasionally we encountered him in the hall or in the street, and then he invariably accosted us. These little interviews never troubled me; I was always quite willing that they should meet in this accidental manner, so long as Mr. Royston kept away from my room; and as the days passed by and there was still no word from Miss Hill-yard, I was thankful that Mr. Royston and I had come to an understanding.

CHAPTER VII.

"WE HAVE MADE A MISTAKE."

WALTON certainly agreed with Muriel: she looked prettier and happier every day.

One thing I noticed with surprise, that she was always tired in the evening and seemed glad when I announced that bed-time had arrived: more than once she seemed overpowered with drowsiness and made apologies for being such a stupid companion. I used to rally her sometimes on her capacity for sleep. "If you were an early riser, I could understand your drowsiness," I said once, as I lighted her candle, "but you have often told me that nothing will drag you out of your bed before half-past seven." I was surprised to see her colour and bite her lip, as though my little speech annoyed her, and she took the candlestick from me rather hastily; but I only smiled at her touchiness.

The next morning I woke early. When

this was the case I never lingered in bed; so when Miss Trotter brought in my hot water at the usual time, she found me dressed and sitting by the open window.

"Dear me!" she observed, "folks are all up betimes this morning. There's Mr. Royston has been out of his room for the last hour—came down in his slippers, too, 'must not disturb the ladies, eh, Miss Trotter?'—so kind and thoughtful; few young gentlemen so considerate; no early school; must be taking a walk—a fine healthy habit for young people, eh, ma'am?"

I hardly know what I answered. A sudden thought—a fear—had come into my mind. I waited breathlessly until Miss Trotter's short steps had pattered along the passage; then I ran downstairs and knocked loudly at Muriel's door; her room was just underneath mine. There was no answer. I opened the door. One glance showed me that the room was empty, and a brief search convinced me that her sailor hat and a certain jacket she wore were also missing. I sank down on a chair, quite overcome by this discovery. I had no doubt in my mind that she had gone out with the intention of meeting Mr. Royston. These

early morning walks would quite explain her weariness in the evening. This was not the first time she had met him; I felt convinced of that. I was so wounded by the thought of this deception, so bitterly hurt and disappointed at this want of rectitude and proper feeling on Muriel's part, so altogether absorbed with these painful reflections, that I sat there quite oblivious of time, and only the sound of the opening door roused me. Of course it was Muriel. For one moment I watched her unperceived. I saw her take a cluster of wild-brier roses from her dress and kiss them tenderly, while a smile, almost infantile in its sweetness, came to her lips; then she turned, and at the sight of my face the smile died away.

"Muriel, where have you been?" Then, as she coloured violently and seemed taken aback at this unexpected question, I went on sorrowfully: "Is it possible that you and Mr. Royston could have arranged this? My dear, you must answer me. Appearances are terribly against you." Then, as her continued silence gave assent, "Oh, Muriel, Muriel, how could you deceive me in this way? I could not have believed it of you, or of him either."

For one moment she looked touched and sorry; then she raised her head in her pretty, imperious way.

"Yes, I have been walking with him," she returned, panting a little; "but it was not wrong. You have no right to speak to me as though I were a naughty child; you cannot judge; you do not know all. It cannot be wrong for me to walk with Bryan."

"Bryan! Good heavens! are you speaking of Mr. Royston? Do you call a stranger by his Christian name?"

Her lip curled as though she wanted to laugh; then a rosy flush came to her face.

"Bryan is not a stranger," she said softly. "We have known each other a long time. I did not wish to tell anyone yet, not even Judith—but I have promised to marry him. He wanted me to be engaged to him weeks ago, but I was too much afraid; but when I came here he insisted on it; he said it would never do to go on like this."

I was almost too much shocked to answer her. When I recovered myself I told her plainly what I thought of her conduct. "I blame Mr. Royston most," I finished; "he is older and knows the world better than you;

he has acted most dishonourably in inducing you to enter into a secret engagement."

"Miss Osborne, if you talk like this I shall hate you," she returned, with a stamp of her little foot; but her eyes were full of tears. "You shall not blame poor Bryan! How could he help himself? He has begged me again and again to let him speak to Judith, but I told him that I should never be allowed to see him again."

But I would not let myself be softened by this childish reasoning. Summoning up all my severity, I told her that I should speak to her sister myself. "You have left me no other resource," I continued sadly. "I trusted you implicitly, Muriel, and this is how you have repaid my trust."

I saw her delicate throat swell and her bosom heave; my thrust had evidently gone home; then she thought of her lover and hardened herself against my reproaches.

"It would be wrong in anyone else, but in our case it is excusable," she answered with girlish sophistry. "The idea of any young man drives mother crazy, and Judith gives in to her. Bryan would have been dismissed at once; Judith would not have ventured to ad-

mit him. What were we to do? We loved each other, and we were both so unhappy! Poor Bryan! But I will never, never give him up! Why are you against us, Miss Osborne? But I suppose you are not young enough to understand."

"My dear, that is not a kind speech."

"Then why are you so unkind to us?" she retorted, melting into tears; but after that she begged my pardon, and was so dear and winning and penitent, so irresistible altogether, that I felt I could have forgiven her a worse crime.

"But your sister must be told," I persisted, when our reconciliation was complete and we were sitting down to our late breakfast; and then Muriel said that she would walk over at once to Leylands. "I must speak before my courage cools," she observed, "and before Bryan tries to prevent me; he does so want to speak himself."

She started very soon after this; and it was not until she was out of sight that it suddenly occurred to me that Miss Hillyard might not be pleased to see her. I recalled with dismay a remark in one of her letters that she would drive over and fetch Muriel the moment that

she was at liberty to do so. I fretted a good deal over my own heedlessness; a note would have summoned Miss Hillyard at once. I passed a miserable morning thinking of this and of all the complications. Would Judith be able to resist her darling's entreaties? Surely not.

I had hardly expected Muriel back to our early dinner. I saw Mr. Royston glance into the room curiously as he passed our window, as though he missed something, and then I remembered that Muriel's favourite seat commanded a view of the little paved path and the gate. As the afternoon wore on I grew still more restless, and I was just making up my mind to stroll in the direction of Leylands, in the hope of meeting her, when Miss Trotter brought me a note. It was from Miss Hillyard, and I opened it with fear and trembling. "Muriel has told me everything," it began. "If she had done so before, it would have spared us both a great deal of pain. Do not reproach yourself, dear Miss Osborne, for anything that has happened. Only my poor child and the man who has so thoughtlessly brought this trouble on her are to blame. Poor darling! if I could only have saved her

from this! I am keeping her with me to-night: to-morrow she will come back to you for an hour; she has something she must do. I need hardly say that, after what has passed, she will be safer at The Nook. I am sure you will agree with me in this. I will write no more to-night; you will see us both to-morrow. Always yours most sincerely,—JUDITH."

I read this note with a chill sense of pain gathering at my heart: there was something inexorable, something ominous, in these few sentences; and yet they expressed no resentment or anger. As I read them again by the fading light, there was a knock at my door and Mr. Royston entered. He looked anxious and disturbed as he glanced round the room.

"Where is Miss Hillyard?" he asked, abruptly; then, as his eyes rested on the letter, "Is that note from her? Do you mean that she has gone?"

I hesitated for a moment, and then I quietly handed him the note. As he read it, he became very pale.

"What does it mean?" he asked irritably. "It is terribly vague. Why cannot people say what they mean? Miss Osborne, if Muriel has gone, I must go too; I cannot let her bear

the brunt of this alone; it is my place to speak—not hers."

"Mr. Royston," I remarked severely, "do you think it was right to talk her into an engagement? She is a mere child; anyone can see that she is ignorant of the world; you ought not to have taken advantage of her youth and inexperience."

My words seemed to sting him: a frown came to his brow. "You cannot judge," he said bitterly; "the case is altogether exceptional. I had no other course open to me. I would have spoken at once to her sister, but she would not hear of it. On my side there is nothing to prevent me: my position is good, I am able even now to maintain a wife, and my uncle would do anything for me. I would have stormed The Nook at once, if only Muriel had not begged me to wait a little. It was wrong; I see it now; it has put me in a false position," went on the young man. "I ought not to have yielded to her for a moment."

I thought so too, and told him so frankly, and then he sat down and we had a long talk. I liked him all the better when we had finished: in spite of his error, he was so simple and manly, so overflowing with love and reverence

for the girl of his choice, that I could not refuse to give him my hand and wish him God-speed. After all, what on earth is so beautiful as the love of two young creatures just beginning life? Such an affection has the breath of Eden about it. He had promised to take my advice and wait until Muriel had paid her promised visit; it would be too late to go on to The Nook that night. If he found it difficult to secure an interview with Muriel, he might then write, or follow her to Leylands. We parted on this understanding; and as he bade me good-night he assured me that our conversation had given him a great deal of comfort. I was inclined to doubt this when I heard him walking about his room that night. I am afraid we neither of us slept very well.

Muriel arrived about noon. Mr. Royston was in his room when the pony-carriage drew up, for I heard him throw up his window, but she walked up the little path very quickly and with her head bent, as though she did not wish to be seen. I met her at the door and drew her into the room. As I kissed her I noticed that her face was very cold, and that her eyes were swollen, as though she had been weeping.

"My dear, how ill you look!" for indeed there was not a vestige of colour in the pretty, girlish face.

"Miss Osborne, I want to see Bryan. Will you ask him to come in? You need not go away; I would rather not be alone with him," and here she looked very piteously. "Please ask him to come. Judith will be here presently; she has to take me back, you know, and there is no time to be lost." But before I could fulfil her behest we heard Mr. Royston's door flung open; there was a quick, imperative tap at mine, and the next moment he walked into the room.

"I could not help it; I felt I must come," he said, with an apologetic glance at me; but before he could say another word two little hands were stretched out beseechingly to him.

"Bryan, you must forgive me; we were too quick; we have made a mistake. I was wrong to be engaged to you. Please, please do not be angry with me—for I am so unhappy!"

"Is it your sister who has told you to say this to me?" returned the young man almost fiercely. For the moment, I believe, he had forgotten my presence. He had the girl's hot, trembling hands in his; there was a

stormy look on his brow, but his eyes were full of reproachful love. "Muriel, was it your mother or your sister who told you to say this?"

"It was neither," she returned in the same pitiful voice. "Dear Miss Osborne, please, please do not go," for I was about to leave the room; "I have nothing to say to Bryan that the whole world may not hear. I am only so very sorry for the mistake we have made," faltered the poor child; "but we must not be engaged any longer."

Mr. Royston started back and dropped her hands as she said this. "Do you know what you are saying?" he exclaimed, as though he could hardly believe his ears. "You are trying to make me believe that you are doing this of your own accord; that no one has coerced you. As though I could credit such a thing!"

"But you must believe it," she pleaded. "Bryan, have I ever told you a story? No one—no one is making me give you up; I am doing it because I think it right. Indeed, indeed, I am telling you the truth!"

"Are you giving me up without any reason?" he demanded harshly; but how white his face

had grown! "Muriel, this is utter nonsense! Have you ceased to love me?"

"No," was the faint whisper.

"Of course not," with a faint gleam of hope in his eyes. "Shall we ever cease to love each other, my darling?" seizing her hand again. "You belong to me, and I will never give you up." Then she shivered and shrank away from him.

"Bryan, I can never marry you. I will never marry anyone; Judith says the same, and I agree with her—she is always right. If I could tell you my reason I know you would forgive me; but I shall never tell it."

"Do you mean you will throw me over and give me no reason for your faithlessness—give me up, when you love me and have promised to be my wife?"

"If I had known what I know now, I would never have promised," she returned steadily, though her lip quivered. "I care for you too much to spoil your life. Bryan, at the risk of making you angry, I must repeat my words: I cannot—I can never marry you."

"Is this your final word?"

"It is," her head drooping sadly as she spoke.

"Then I had better leave you before I forget myself. Muriel, how can you have the heart to treat me like this?" His voice choked; he gave her a look of mingled anger and anguish, and walked out of the room. It was better so; he was losing his self-control, and the scene was becoming too painful.

For one moment she seemed as if she would call him back. "Cruel, cruel, to leave me so!" she murmured, while tears rolled down her pale face; but after a minute she recovered herself. "But it is better so, better for him to be angry with me; it will make it easier for him to bear it. Miss Osborne," turning to me with a heart-broken smile, "don't let me think; help me to get my things ready before Judith comes. She is right; I cannot stay in this house; I must go home."

"But I may come to you there?"

My question seemed to bewilder her; she put up her hand to her head in a weary fashion that reminded me of Judith. "I do not know. You must ask Judith. I think I am too confused to tell you anything." And out of sheer pity I was obliged to keep silence.

I think Muriel hardly knew what she was doing; she was compelled at last to leave

everything to me. When I had finished, we went downstairs together. Mr. Royston's door stood wide open, but the room was empty; Muriel need not have averted her eyes as she passed it.

Miss Hillyard was waiting for us. As we entered she crossed the room and greeted me kindly. Her manner was as gentle as ever. "I cannot stop now—we are rather in a hurry, are we not, Muriel? But I will come and see you some time to-morrow. You have been so good to my dear child, and we have given you so much trouble!" She passed her arm caressingly round her young sister as she spoke, but I noticed that Muriel did not respond: as she put up her face to kiss me, her lips felt quite cold, and there was a dazed look in her eyes.

"Good-by, and thank you for everything," she said, as though she were repeating a lesson by rote; but I found it difficult to answer. "Courage, darling!" I heard Judith whisper as they went out together. "Courage?" What did it all mean? I went back to my room feeling very low. What shadow had fallen between these two young hearts? I thought of the smiling, girlish lips that had

kissed the roses the previous morning, and now the remembrance of their cold, clinging touch made me shiver. Life is full of these tragedies; but alas! for the human actors that have to play out their dreary parts!

CHAPTER VIII.

THE "KILVINGTON EXPRESS."

It was impossible to retire to rest that night without saying a word to Mr. Royston. It was true that he might regard a visit on my part as an intrusion on his privacy; most likely he would be too sore and unhappy to allow of any such word; but my heart was so full of sympathy for him and Muriel that I determined to risk even a rebuff. When I knocked at his door there was no response. I found afterwards that he had not heard me. The lamp had not been lighted, but the cold white moonbeams were shining full into the room, and I could see his attitude distinctly. He was lying back in his chair, with his arms over his head. When I addressed him he started violently.

"Mr. Royston," I said quietly, "I trust you will forgive this intrusion, but after what has passed I felt I could not go to bed without saying a word to you."

"You are very good," he returned in a dejected tone. "You are awfully kind to think of me at all!"

"How can I help it? Surely you must know how sorry I am for you and Muriel." As I mentioned her name I heard a caught breath almost like a sob, and he sprang up from his chair and began pacing up and down the room in an agitated manner. I thought it best to be silent; he would speak to me of his own accord, by-and-bye; and I was right. With a strong effort he seemed to pull himself together, and then he came back to his seat.

"It is no use," he said bitterly. "I cannot keep myself in hand to-night; it has all been too sudden. Miss Osborne, you were there; you heard it all from her own lips; you heard her give me up, without one word of explanation."

"Yes, and I was terribly sorry for you both."

"You were sorry for me, you mean."

"No, Mr. Royston, I meant what I said; sorry as I was for you, I was even more grieved for her; for if ever a girl cared for the man whom she was sending from her, Muriel is that girl."

"And yet she has given me up."

"Yes, but not of her own free will; some circumstances of which we are ignorant have compelled her to break off her engagement. Mr. Royston, if you had seen her face when the door closed upon you, I think you would have forgiven her. Certainly you may rest assured of this, that she is breaking her own heart as well as yours."

He seemed to listen to me breathlessly; in some sense this assurance seemed to give him comfort; but he was too deeply wounded for any present healing; his man's pride rose up against such arbitrary treatment, and for a long time he combated the notion that anything could compel Muriel to give him up. He talked to me very freely after this, and seemed to derive consolation from my ready sympathy; but a few words that I said just before I bade him good-night seemed to give him the most comfort.

"Why do you not send for your uncle, Mr. Royston?"

Strange to say, this idea had never occurred to him. "I will telegraph to him at once," he replied. "What a fool I have been not to think of Uncle Calvert before! He has the clearest head in the world, and if anyone could

unravel this confounded mystery it would be he. Thanks awfully, Miss Osborne—you have done me no end of good! I believe I was ready to hang myself an hour ago; but I feel better now. Of course I know you are right, and that she cares for me; I am not such a fool as all that; if I had not been in such a rage I would have told her so. She may give me up a dozen times, but all the same I shall stick to her. I have never seen the girl who could hold a candle to her," finished the poor young fellow, in a choked voice.

I was a little easier in my mind when I had left him. Stranger as he was to me, I had conceived a great respect for Mr. Grenfell; and I was glad to think the poor lad would have his best friend beside him in his trouble. Of course he would come to him at once and advise him how to act under these distressing circumstances. He was a barrister, too, and doubtless his experience and knowledge of human nature would enable him to help his nephew. Miss Hillyard had not appointed any hour for her promised visit; but, although I hardly expected her until the afternoon, I did not venture to leave the house, for fear that I should miss her. I was too restless and

uncomfortable to settle down to my usual pursuits; so I set myself the task of clearing out a cupboard on the upper landing that Miss Trotter had appropriated to my use; the employment would keep me busy for an hour or two; it was at present full of lumber, books, and old newspapers and a stock of nondescript odds and ends. I grew interested over my task, and was just sitting down to rest for a moment, when a paragraph in one of the newspapers attracted my eye, and a feeling of curiosity induced me to read it.

It was headed "The Kilvington Mystery," and, glancing at the paper I held, I saw it was the *Kilvington Express*. The article was written in the bombastic and somewhat verbose style of the country editor. "A terrible tragedy has lately happened in our neighbourhood, and which has plunged our little town into profound gloom. Last Tuesday afternoon the two sons of our esteemed and much-lamented member, Philip Haldane, M.P., of The Warren, were shooting in the Warren coverts. It had been noticed by several people who had met them that morning that the young men seemed gloomy and out of sorts; this was specially commented on by the Rector, who

stopped to exchange a few words with them. A little later George Armstrong and his son Silas, who were cutting wood in the copse, saw the young Squires pass; they were talking loudly and angrily, and Silas, who was about a stone's-throw from his father, heard Horace, the elder one, say: 'Give me your word, Beaver, or I vow I'll do for you and her too;' but the answer to this failed to reach him. A few minutes later a rough, seafaring sort of man, with a wallet over his shoulder, passed through the copse and asked Silas for a match to light his pipe. The man had hardly left him five minutes before there was a loud report close by; but of course no notice was taken of it. Half-an-hour later, as he was making his way down a side-path to find a tree marked by the bailiff, he was horrified to see Beaver Haldane lying on the grass, with his gun beside him. He was evidently quite dead; and his brother was standing beside him, too much stunned to answer any questions. Later on he gave a confused and unsatisfactory account. He and his brother had parted company after a time, and as he was crossing the nut-copse a pheasant rose near him. Somehow, he missed his aim. The

next moment he heard a groan; something heavy fell behind the bushes, and he saw his brother lying on the grass, with a rough sort of man, like a tramp, bending over him. When questioned about this man's singular disappearance—for no trace has yet been discovered of him—Mr. Horace Haldane could give no satisfactory information; indeed, it is to be regretted that his whole evidence was so confused that it has only deepened unhappy suspicions. He said that he was too much overwhelmed with the shock of the accident to notice the man clearly, but he remembered that as he stepped out of the bushes he said to him, a little roughly: 'You have done for him, master; but it was no fault of yours. I saw the whole thing quite plainly.' Inquiries have been made for the tramp, and certain facts have been elicited about him. The night previously he slept at the Pig and Whistle, and gave his name as Jacob Dawson, and told the landlady that he was on his way to South America.

"We grieve to say that, in consequence of the evidence of Silas Armstrong and two of the servants at The Warren, there is little doubt that Mr. Horace Haldane will be com-

mitted for trial at the next assizes for the wilful murder of his brother; and, in spite of the unfortunate young man's protestations of his innocence, things look very black against him. It is now an acknowledged fact that the brothers were on bad terms: they had quarrelled about a certain young lady to whom they were both paying their addresses, and, though it is not well to mention names, the young lady is well known in the neighbourhood for her beauty and coquetry. A great deal of sympathy is felt for the family at The Warren; and it is greatly feared that Mrs. Haldane, who has been in delicate health since her husband's death, will not get over the shock; and her eldest daughter——" Here the page was torn across, and the thread of the story was broken.

"Truth is stranger than fiction," I said to myself as I laid the paper aside, but somehow I could not forget that dismal little tragedy: it haunted me all the rest of the morning. I wished I could hear the end. Had that unfortunate Horace Haldane been committed for trial? Had they acquitted him? Or was he really guilty, and had he paid the penalty of his unnatural crime? In that case, what had

become of the unhappy widowed mother? I wondered how many years ago it had all happened; the torn paper gave me no clue. I worked busily all the rest of the morning, and spent the afternoon sewing by the window. I saw Mr. Royston once or twice in the course of the day; he looked ill and subdued, but told me very quietly that he had heard from his uncle, and fully expected him that evening.

When evening came I grew weary of my solitude, and as Miss Hillyard had not yet made her appearance I determined to meet her. I wanted air and exercise, and a brisk walk would do me good. Mousquetaire was delighted when he saw my bonnet, and flew barking and frisking for joy towards the gate; but he was doomed to disappointment; at that very moment the tall, graceful figure of Miss Hillyard turned the corner, with the hound, as usual, beside her. "Were you going out?" she asked quickly. "It is such a lovely evening! Perhaps you will like to walk back with me; we could talk just as well, and it seems cruel to keep you in."

"Yes; but you must come in and rest first," was my reply. "I do not wish to part with you so soon."

"Very well," she returned, with the soft smile that always lit up her dark face with new beauty. But at that moment Mr. Grenfell came up to the gate. He was walking very fast, and carried a small portmanteau, as though he had just come from the station. He just lifted his hat to me with a pleasant "Good-evening," when a faint exclamation from Judith arrested him. He stood for a moment as though he were suddenly transfixed; I noticed his face grew pale; then he gave her a keen, piercing look, and, raising his hat again, walked into the house.

I hardly dared look at Miss Hillyard. She was perfectly white, and trembling from head to foot. "My dear," I said gently, "you are faint. No, do not say a word; let me help you." And, passing my arm through hers, I half led, half dragged her into my room.

But it was not faintness; I knew that well; it was some strong, overmastering emotion that was convulsing her features and that made her gasp as though in pain. She took no notice of the water I brought her; but as I stood beside her she suddenly laid her head against my shoulder, as though some weakness compelled her. "Oh, heaven! it was Calvert!" I

heard her whisper, and two large tears ran down her face. "We have met again, and like this, and he would not speak to me!" And she shuddered all over.

It was useless to say anything; I could only soothe her as though she were a child; but by-and-bye she started up with a terrified expression as Hector laid his slender nose against her hand. The action seemed to rouse her. "Yes, I must go back; it will never do to stay here. If I were to see him again, to meet that reproachful, severe look, I should die! Dear friend, help me! I am so strangely weak to-night, and I must go home."

I endeavoured to persuade her to the contrary; I told her that she was ill, and that if she would stay with me I would take care of her and no one should molest her; but she would not listen to this for a moment. She rose from her seat trembling all over, and repeated that she must go, and go at once; the air would revive her and do her good; she was stifled in this room (and here her eyes grew a little wild); I might walk with her if I liked, but she could not talk; she had had a shock—a great shock—and I must give her time to recover herself. All this in a hurried, broken way.

Alas! I had no power to prevent her; and we went out into the gathering dusk together. Some intense power of will sustained her until the house was out of sight, and then her strength seemed to fail again; she leaned on me heavily, and every now and then I heard short, gasping breaths, as though from an oppressed heart. I thought that walk would never come to an end. Once we sat down, and it was long before she could summon strength to rise; but if I spoke to her she only shook her head and said she could not talk. "It is my heart," she whispered at last, as we walked slowly down the beech avenue. "I have gone through so much; and it is overtaxed. Do not tell Muriel this. Poor child! she is so unhappy. Ours is a cruel fate. Oh, why could not Calvert have spared me that look? Have I not suffered enough?" Here a sob choked her utterance, and I could hear that she was weeping.

It was quite dark when we reached The Nook. As I set the rusty bell tingling, the door was opened quickly, and Muriel stood on the threshold.

"How late you are, Judith!" she said fretfully. My poor, pretty Muriel, how those few

hours had changed her! Then, as she caught sight of me, her pale face brightened. "Dear Muriel," I said softly, "I think your sister is ill—at least, she is far from well. Will you take care of her? and I will come round in the morning and see how she is."

"Ill! Judith!" Then, as a glance at her sister's face confirmed my words, Muriel put her arms round her sister and drew her gently into the house. I thought it better not to follow them; they would talk more freely to each other if they were alone. I walked back to Walton feeling sadder than ever. The shadows seemed creeping closer. As I let myself in, I could hear voices in Mr. Royston's room; the night was half over before I heard him coming upstairs, and it was long after that before I could compose myself to sleep.

CHAPTER IX.

"YOU WILL TELL ME EVERYTHING."

I STARTED early for Leylands. When I reached the beech avenue I was surprised to see Mr. Grenfell coming quickly towards me. The meeting was evidently unexpected on his part, for he looked slightly confused as he stopped to shake hands with me, and he seemed painfully anxious to impress on my mind that morning walks were necessary to his constitution.

"This is better than London streets," he went on hurriedly. "They call the little village yonder Leylands, do they not? I was never here before, but it is very pretty and Arcadian."

"Are you going to have breakfast with Mr. Royston?"

"Yes," rather absently, "but Bryan has early work this morning; he was in his classroom as I passed. You are going on to The

Nook, I suppose, Miss Osborne. May I ask if you have known these ladies long?"

"Do you mean Miss Hillyard and her sister?"

"Miss Hillyard?" looking at me a little strangely. "Yes, to be sure; we are talking of the same person." I thought his manner a little odd, but my reply told him all that he evidently wished to know—that I was deeply interested in them both, and had conceived the warmest attachment to them.

"I am glad to hear it," he returned with rather a sad smile. "They need friends." He seemed as though he wished to say more; for he hesitated, looked at me, and finally bade me good-by in a hurried way, as though he feared to commit himself. I thought Mr. Grenfell looked older and more careworn this morning; there were lines round his eyes and mouth that I had not noticed before. I wondered what had brought him to Leylands. I began to be a little weary of wondering; I felt oppressed with all the vagueness and mystery. Only one thing was clear to me—that the woman who had spoiled Mr. Grenfell's life was Judith Hillyard. Those few words, "Oh, heaven! it is Calvert!" had betrayed her secret.

When I reached The Nook a tradesman's cart was standing before the door, and a curly-haired lad was holding it open and whistling to Hector, who received these overtures with sullen dignity. As the inner door was open also, I went in without waiting for Rebecca to announce me, and found my way to the morning-room; but I regretted my want of formality when I found that neither Miss Hillyard nor Muriel was there, and that its sole occupant was a young man, who was reading the paper in the farthest window.

My appearance seemed to startle him, for he threw down the paper and jumped up as though to leave the room. I begged him not to disturb himself; but he said hurriedly that one of the Miss Hillyards would come to me. He looked about eight-and-twenty, and was an exceedingly handsome man. But I was less struck by his good looks than by his wonderful likeness to Miss Hillyard; he had the same dark complexion, the same large, melancholy eyes, and his voice resembled hers. Could he be any relation? I asked myself as I took the seat he had just vacated. A small book was lying at my elbow; it was a Greek Testament, and I took it up curiously; it was

a worn, shabby little book, and was evidently well read; it seemed to open of its own accord at the fly-leaf. As I read the name I uttered an exclamation and felt a sudden sensation of giddiness. Were my eyes deceiving me? Could I be dreaming? The name I had seen was "Horace Matheson Haldane, from his brother Beaver." I do not know how long I sat there. I was conscious of nothing until some one touched my shoulder, and, looking up, I saw Miss Hillyard regarding me somewhat anxiously.

"What is the matter?" she asked "You are quite pale. You look as though something had troubled you. Why did you not ring as usual? Rebecca had orders not to show anyone in here; the room was engaged; a gentleman who is staying here—but of course you saw him," interrupting herself still more nervously, "and he told me you were here."

I do not know what possessed me—to my dying day I shall never understand the sudden, uncontrollable impulse that impelled me to answer her—but as she paused I looked her full in the eyes, and said:

"Yes, I have seen your brother, Miss Hillyard. He is very like you; no one could mis-

take such a resemblance; and I know, too, that his name is Horace Haldane."

For one moment I thought she would have fainted; and yet it was with no intent of wringing the truth from her that I blurted out this strange sentence; the secret force that impelled me had overmastered me for the moment. When I saw her sink into a chair with a white, stricken look, I accused myself of positive cruelty.

"My dear, my dear!" I exclaimed remorsefully, as I chafed her cold hands, "I did not mean to say this; but the words seemed to come of themselves. Look here, this little book told me; and then there was the likeness. When I entered this house a few minutes ago I had no idea of your secret; now I know everything; it is all clear as the day. But you need not be afraid of me; if ever a friend were true, I am true to you and Muriel."

"Do you mean it?" she asked piteously. "Oh, Miss Osborne! how could you frighten me so? We never meant you to see him. I told Muriel that Rebecca must not admit you; but she begged so hard that she might speak to you for a moment, and, as Horace always has this room, you were to be shown into the

dining-room. Poor Horace! he has had a fright too. He looked like a ghost when he told me a strange lady had seen him."

"Now that I have seen him, you will tell me everything, will you not? And then perhaps I may be able to help you. I know more than you think. I can tell you the name of your old home: it was The Warren, Kilvington, was it not?" But she put up her hand to silence me.

"Hush! I cannot speak to you yet. Will you wait a moment? I must send Muriel to my mother; she is very ill—worse than usual. That is why Horace is with us; she made me send for him. Somehow I think she will not be long with us. Ah, well, for her own sake we ought to be thankful when she is released from a life of misery." And with these words she left me.

I was alone for nearly half-an-hour, and then she came back and took a seat quietly beside me. In my surprise and agitation, I had forgotten the events of last night; but now as the light fell on her worn features, I was shocked at the change in her appearance. Her eyes looked more sunken, and there was an expression in them as though her heart

were slowly breaking. I felt convinced then that, unless the burden were lifted from her, Judith Hillyard would not be long for this world.

"My mother is asleep, and Muriel is beside her; so we shall not be interrupted. Now will you tell me all you know? I suppose"—here she hesitated a moment, as though she could hardly pronounce his name—"I suppose Mr. Grenfell has been talking to you."

"He has told me nothing." Then, as she glanced at me in surprise, I related the few facts that I had gleaned from the *Kilvington Express*.

She listened to me with forced composure. I told her that I had come to the conclusion that these unhappy circumstances had induced her to break off her engagement with Mr. Grenfell, and that their meeting yesterday had convinced me that she was the person to whom Mr. Royston had alluded. "Mr. Royston was ignorant of the lady's name, but he told me that it was for her sake that his uncle had remained single. I suppose"—and here I looked at her inquiringly—"that the same reasons have compelled Muriel to give up her lover."

"Yes," she returned quietly; "but you

must not think that we have coerced her. Muriel has her share of the family pride. She will not bring a blight over any man's life. It was my painful duty to tell her the truth: for her own sake we had kept it from her. Her first words when she heard everything were, 'Judith, you must help me; I must not, I dare not marry Bryan while this stain is on Horace!'

"Good heavens! do you mean to imply that your brother is guilty?" I spoke a little too hastily, for she changed colour and put her hand to her heart.

"I implied nothing. The verdict was 'not proven,' but as far as public opinion is concerned he is not cleared. People said that the evidence was strongly against him; even Calvert—Mr. Grenfell, I mean—allowed that, though he always believed in his innocence; but he was young, and there were extenuating circumstances, so they said, and the jury were unwilling to convict him on circumstantial evidence: 'not proven,' but they would not acquit him."

"That seems hardly just."

"There was so much to criminate him," she murmured, in the same helpless tone; "ap-

pearances were so against him. He and Beaver had not been on good terms; both of them were in love with Sibyl Grey, our rector's daughter, and but for Horace she and Beaver would have been engaged. It was this that told against him in court; the servants of The Warren used to hear them quarrelling in their rooms at night; once old Joseph, our butler, came to me with tears in his eyes and asked me to separate them. Of course it was Horace's fault; he was always passionate; but until then he and Beaver had been so fond of each other."

"You have your brother's account, of course."

"Yes, he has told us everything; but he was too much stunned by the accident to give very clear evidence. He owned that he and Beaver had had words, and that they had parted in anger. He wanted Beaver to go away and give him a chance of winning Sibyl, and Beaver had refused. He says that he left poor Beaver in the nut-copse, and that he intended to make his way towards the Fairies' Hollow, as we used to call it, as he was too much out of sorts to go after the game; but as he was leaning against a tree, lost in

thought, a pheasant rose from the bushes near him; and he snatched up his gun and determined to have a shot at him; but his hand shook, and he missed the bird, and the next moment he heard a groan, followed by the crackling of the bushes." She stopped here in extreme agitation, and I begged her to spare herself, the story was too terrible. I told her that I knew the rest—that his brother was dead; and then I hazarded the question whether anything had been heard of the tramp.

My question seemed to surprise her.

"No; they could find no trace of him: he seemed to have vanished as suddenly as he came. The landlady of the Pig and Whistle said he seemed a decent sort of seafaring man, only he was rather down on his luck, he told her; but Horace thought him a mere tramp. The counsel for the defence was very anxious to find him, and I know a detective was sent to Liverpool."

"Did they advertise for him in America?"

"I do not know. My memory gets confused at times, when I try to remember that dreadful day."

"Your brother is generally away, you say?"

"Yes; he has a ranch in Colorado. Occu-

pation is good for him, and he likes the life. He is happier away from England. I think," hesitating slightly, "that the shock affected his nerves; he seems subject to a strange apprehension; he declares that he is virtually guilty in the eyes of the law, and that at any moment he may be arrested; and my mother has the same fear."

"That is why you have changed your name?"

"It is my mother's name, and it was at her wish that we adopted it. Perhaps it is difficult for you to grasp the whole situation. When dear Beaver was brought back to The Warren—he was her darling, her Benjamin—we feared for her reason, and even now it is easy to see that her mind is unhinged. We should have gone abroad with Horace, if her health would have permitted her to undertake the voyage; but she was utterly prostrate. When she rallied a little, her first desire was for utter privacy; we must go where no one could find us; and, as one place seemed as good as another, we brought her here. As long as she lives we must stay here; for I could not take the responsibility of moving her; a strange voice or footstep throws her

into a paroxysm of nervous excitement that might at any moment end her life."

"And you will never return to The Warren?"

"Never," with a faint shudder. "We have all suffered too much there. Besides, Sibyl Grey is still at the rectory. She and Horace correspond; she has always believed in his innocence, and is sorry for him. Her letters are his chief pleasure, for he is still in love with her. He tells me that she is utterly changed—that since Beaver's death she has devoted herself to her family and the poor people round her. I was always fond of her, in spite of her faults."

She paused here, as though she were weary, and glanced at the timepiece. "I must go now," she said, rising somewhat hastily. "Horace is leaving us to-night, and he will want me. There is no use in our keeping him any longer; my mother may go on for a long time yet, and this quiet life is so bad for him. Good-by, dear Miss Osborne. I will send Muriel to you for a few minutes; but you must promise not to keep her long."

She left me, and a moment afterwards Muriel crept into the room. Poor little soul! her

heart was too full for speech; she could only throw herself into my arms and lay her weary little face against mine; but presently she raised her head and dried her eyes, as though she were ashamed of her emotion.

"No, you must not pity me; it was all my fault, although Judith is too kind to tell me so. I had no right to let Bryan make love to me. I ought not to have listened to him. Oh, if I could suffer for both! How does he look, Miss Osborne? Is he very unhappy, or is he still angry with me? I hope—I hope that he will always be angry with me," finished the poor child, but her lips quivered as she spoke; "it will make it easier for him to give me up; he is so young, as Judith says, and he has known me such a little time, that he will soon get over it." But her eyes contradicted her words; they seemed to appeal to me for comfort.

I told her as much as I could without betraying Mr. Royston's confidence: that he was deeply wounded and very unhappy, and that I was sure that in his heart he had already forgiven her. "I do not think he has quite lost hope," I continued, watching her very narrowly as I spoke. "Mr. Royston has a

strong will; he does not relinquish easily anything on which he has set his mind."

A faint glow came to Muriel's face—no doubt it was sweet to her to hear this—but the next moment she braced herself afresh. "You must tell him not to hope," she said quickly. "If you are his friend, it would be kinder to bid him forget me as soon as possible." But to this I made no answer, and a few minutes afterwards I took my leave.

She followed me to the gate and stood there watching me. How sweet and girlish she looked! She was in white, and a spray of red leaves she had just gathered was still in her hands. It grieved me to the heart to leave her in that desolate house. She was so young, so framed for happiness and love, that it was sad to think that the sorrow that had shadowed her sister's life must touch her too.

But it was not of Muriel that I thought as I walked down the sunshiny road. I was pondering on my interview with her sister. A strange doubt had crept into my mind: if Horace Haldane were innocent, if he had not deliberately and with intent aimed that shot at his brother's heart, why had Judith renounced her lover? Why had she doomed

herself and him to a lonely, unsatisfactory life?

The answer to this was plain; something in her guarded manner, in the effort with which she spoke of her brother, had revealed the truth to me. However much she might deny it, in her secret heart Judith believed in her brother Horace's guilt, and her reasons for this belief would be locked up in her bosom until her dying day. I wondered if Mr. Grenfell had guessed this; but, as I remembered the calm, inscrutable look with which he had greeted the woman he had hoped to make his wife, I feared that no such thought had ever entered his mind.

CHAPTER X.

MR. GRENFELL SEEKS AN INTERVIEW.

I WAS sitting alone in my room that afternoon, brooding over these sad thoughts, when I heard a knock at my door, and to my surprise, Mr. Grenfell entered. He apologised very courteously for his intrusion. "The fact is, Miss Osborne," he said, with a pleasant smile, "you have taken such a great interest in my nephew, and Bryan looks upon you so much as his friend, that I have ventured to take this liberty with you. I know you are in his confidence about his unhappy attachment to the youngest Miss"—he hesitated slightly—"Hillyard."

"To the youngest Miss Haldane, I suppose you mean," for I thought it best to show him at once that I understood the reason of his hesitation.

He started. For the first moment he was evidently taken aback. "I had no idea that you were acquainted with their sad story," he

returned. "Bryan told me that you had only known them for a few months."

"That is true. A mere accident gave me a clue to the secret; now I know everything," with a meaning emphasis on the last word, and I think he understood me.

"Then in that case," he went on, with decided relief, "we can talk with greater ease. As you may suppose, Bryan was quite in the dark, and the whole story was a great shock to him. You see, he was not on the spot, as I was, and it was a little difficult for him to realise such a tragedy."

Mr. Grenfell spoke very quietly, but his apparent calmness did not deceive me; he was a man who would always hide his deepest feelings. Stranger as he was to me, I knew that this sudden and unexpected meeting with his old love had tried him sorely. "I suppose Mr. Royston will be more ready to renounce Muriel now," I observed, tentatively, for that was not my real belief at all.

He shook his head. "You do not know Bryan, if you think that; he is an obstinate fellow, and his nature is very tenacious; I always tell him that he has something of the bull-dog about him. He will not hear of giv-

ing her up; on the contrary, he is all the more eager to marry her; her unhappy situation only makes him wish to shield her."

"I can understand that. Mr. Royston only proves the reality of his affection."

"Other men would gladly have done the same," he answered, quickly; then he stopped and a sombre light came into his eyes. "I knew Muriel Haldane very slightly—she was a mere child five years ago—but if she shares her sister's pride and strong will, Bryan will stand a poor chance of realising his wishes."

He spoke with some degree of bitterness, and I was silent for a few moments. Should I venture to speak to him openly, would he regard my frankness as an unpardonable liberty? I could not answer this; but I felt the circumstances were too peculiar, the stake too precious, for any mere conventionality to hinder me; for his own good I must run the risk of offending him.

"Mr. Grenfell, I am going to take a strange liberty. I know of the relation in which you stand to the family. Will you answer me one question? Believe me, I am not asking it out of curiosity. What reason did Miss Haldane assign for breaking off her engagement?"

It was evident that he resented this bluntness; he drew himself up a little stiffly, and a dark flush rose to his face.

"You think I am impertinent; but you do not know my motive. I am aware that Miss Haldane broke off her engagement with you under a pressing sense of duty, and that in doing so she sacrificed her own happiness; and I consider she acted very nobly."

"You must pardon me if I differ from you," almost haughtily. "There is nothing noble in an exaggerated and mistaken sense of duty. You must remember, when you speak in this one-sided way, that she sacrificed my happiness as well; and now her sister is following her example. I am very sorry for Bryan, but I have told him that there is no hope for him: even if his lady-love be inclined to yield, her sister's strong will will dominate her."

He was making my task a little difficult, but I would not be beaten. I looked at him very pleadingly.

"Mr. Grenfell, you have not answered my question." My persistence evidently surprised him; but he must have known that a strong motive actuated me.

"Mrs. Haldane was suffering from hysteria

at the time of the unfortunate accident, and was in a lamentable state—I believe there was some fear of her losing her reason—and Horace was in a highly nervous state.”

“And you did not consider these sufficient grounds for her breaking off the engagement?”

“Certainly not. They were only reasons for postponing her marriage; and any man would have been willing to wait under such circumstances. Unfortunately, Miss Haldane considered it her duty to remain unmarried.”

‘ Mr. Grenfell, has it ever occurred to you that she may have kept from you her real reason—that under the pretext of her mother’s mental illness she may have hidden the true motive? There is nothing capricious or morbid in Judith Haldane’s character; if she refused to marry you it was only because she dared not.”

“What do you mean?” he asked, and by his manner I could see that no suspicion of the truth had ever entered his mind.

“Do you think that a high-minded, conscientious woman like Miss Haldane, a proud woman, too, would consent to marry any man, however dearly she may have loved him, if

she believed her brother guilty of wilful and premeditated murder, of the horrible sin of fratricide?"

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed, turning very pale, "what can you mean by putting such a question? Horace was absolutely innocent. I know things went dead against him in court, but no one who knew him believed that the shot was anything but purely accidental."

"I am glad to hear you say this; but, Mr. Grenfell, I cannot change my opinion: I believe, as surely as I sit here, that Miss Haldane is convinced in her own mind that her brother is guilty, and that this belief is torturing her day by day. A woman's instinct is very quick, and I have come to this conclusion. This is the true reason why she has broken off her engagement; she will shadow no man's life."

Some strange emotion seemed to overmaster him, and he was unable to reply for a moment. "Can this be true?" I heard him say; then he walked to the window and stood there, as though lost in thought.

"If you be right," he said, at last, breaking the silence so suddenly that I quite started at the sound of his voice, "I have done Miss Haldane a great injustice. Oh, if she had

only trusted me! if she had only allowed me to guess this!"

"How could she hint such a thing of her brother? She would hide such a suspicion in her own bosom. If she has told anyone, it is Muriel."

"Yes, I see; you think the same motive has actuated the younger sister."

"That is my idea, certainly, and I think I am right. Mr. Grenfell, you know now why I asked you that question. Until their brother's name is cleared, Miss Haldane and her sister will decline to marry anyone."

"I must tell Bryan this."

"Yes; and I think there is one other thing to do, and that is to find Jacob Dawson, if he be living."

He seemed a little mystified at this; the name had escaped his memory; but as soon as I had recalled it to him his keen, lawyer-like sagacity awoke in a moment.

"To be sure. They sent a detective to Liverpool, but they could never find a trace of him. I remember poor Horace was so anxious that he should be found. I will talk the matter over with Bryan, and I will go over the evidence for the defence most carefully with

him. We will not leave a stone unturned. What fools we men are, even the wisest of us! To think that she was bearing this, too, and that I was hard on her! No wonder she looks ill and changed—so changed that for the moment I failed to recognise her."

I would not add to his self-reproach by telling him that his sternness had almost broken her heart; perhaps one day, if things came right, he would make his peace with her, and those two proud natures would read each other more truly. So I bade him good-by kindly when he rose to take leave; his nephew had just come in from afternoon school, and he determined to speak to him at once.

I was not sorry to be left alone. The agitations of the last two days and my deep sympathy for these young creatures had culminated in an intense nervous headache, that prostrated me for the next twenty-four hours; the next morning I found it impossible to raise my head from the pillow, and when Miss Trotter brought me my tea she informed me that Mr. Royston had been asking after me, and that he desired to be told directly if I felt well enough to see him.

I passed the morning in languor and pain,

but when evening came I felt much better, and sent for him. He came at once, and was very kind and sympathising. He said I had taken all the worry too much to heart and had made myself ill; then he told me that his uncle had gone down to Kilvington to interview the landlady of the Pig and Whistle.

"You have put new life into him, Miss Osborne," he continued gratefully. "He declares you have made everything clear to him—that he had never rightly understood why Miss Hillyard—I mean Miss Haldane—persisted in refusing to marry him, but that now everything is as plain as daylight to him. Of course he thinks that she is utterly mistaken; and if we can only find Jacob Dawson, he hopes to be able to prove it to her. He says she was always a little hard on her brother Horace, and that Beaver was her favourite; she never quite understood his excitable nature, and his weakness and vacillation tried her. By all accounts, I am afraid Miss Hillyard is a very strong-minded woman."

"She is simply the most interesting person that I have ever met," I returned quickly; and then I asked Mr. Royston if he had ever seen a more lovely face.

"She is certainly very beautiful," he answered in rather a grudging manner; "that is, she would be beautiful if she were not so thin and colorless; but I think her sister far prettier." And after that there was nothing more to be said. To compare Muriel with her! what strange, purblind creatures lovers are! They see everything through a glamour. "A poor thing, but mine own," as Touchstone said of his rustic, homely Audrey. After all, there is a sort of pathos in these words.

We had a long talk after that, and I expressed my surprise to Mr. Royston that the search for Jacob Dawson had not been carried out more vigorously. "It seems to me that he was the sole eye-witness, and that only his testimony is wanting to clear Horace Haldane's name."

"My uncle thinks that they did not attach sufficient importance to Haldane's account; his evidence was so confused that more than one person thought it was merely an aberration of fancy on his part. True, Jacob Dawson was seen by the young wood-cutter—in fact, there was some conversation between them; but from what Uncle Calvert tells me there is certainly a discrepancy between Hal-

dane's and Silas Armstrong's account, and in point of time it was plainly impossible for Jacob Dawson to have reached the dingle."

"It is possible that Silas Armstrong may have been wrong."

"Certainly; and I think with you, Miss Osborne, that a more energetic search for the man should have been prosecuted; five years is a long time, and he may not be living. We shall hear what my uncle thinks; he has promised to telegraph directly he reaches town, and I am to meet him there. Now we have talked long enough, for you are looking pale and tired; so I mean to wish you good-night." And he would not let me speak another word.

I went over to Middleton the following afternoon, as I had some commissions to do for myself and Muriel; there were some books and drawing-paper that she had long wanted, and we had planned to go over together. My business occupied the whole afternoon, and it was evening before I returned. Two notes were awaiting me; one was from Mr. Royston, telling me that he was going up to town that very evening, and the other was from Muriel, begging me to come

over the next day; her brother had left, and, as Judith was unable to leave her mother, she was sadly in want of companionship. I was to stay to luncheon, and we would have one of our old sketching afternoons.

I spent the whole day at The Nook, and before I left Judith begged me, as a great favour, to spend a few days with them. "I am upstairs the greater part of the day," she said, "and it is not good for Muriel to be alone; she is not looking well, and I can see she is fretting." And, as it was impossible to refuse such a request, I promised to return the next day.

Mr. Royston had just arrived, and his bag was still on the hall-table. He came round to my room at once, and gave me a piece of intelligence that almost took away my breath. He and Mr. Grenfell were going to New York in quest of Jacob Dawson.

I asked him what had put such an idea into Mr. Grenfell's head, and why they did not advertise; but he said his uncle needed a change, and that he had always wished to visit America, and that he had induced him to accompany him.

"You see," he observed, in the most casual

way, as though New York were just round the corner, "term ends next Thursday, and I shall be free for several weeks, and I am not exactly in the humour for Swiss valleys and Alpine climbing, and as we are both in the same boat we may as well cast in our lot together. Uncle Calvert thinks we can do the business better in person; and if we be unsuccessful we can put the matter in the hands of a smart Yankee detective. He says he had a little talk with a man who was hostler at the Pig and Whistle five years ago; he was in hospital at the time of the trial, on account of some injury from the kick of a horse, and no one had applied to him for evidence. His name was Robert Drake. He remembered Jacob Dawson distinctly, because he was an Essex man and came from his own village; Dawson told him that he had worked his way over from New York, because he wanted to see his old mother again, who was still living at Dunscombe, but that she was just dead, and that he was going back, as he had a bit of land out there; he had wandered out of his way to look up a mate of his, but that he meant to go on to Liverpool. He told Drake that he never expected to see the old country

again. Drake's account of him was that he was a decent sort of chap, and as sharp as a Yankee."

When Mr. Royston had finished his account I told him of my proposed visit to The Nook. He said frankly that he was very glad to hear it, and that as he should not see me the next evening he would wish me good-by now.

He spoke so lightly that I reminded him that we should not meet for two whole months; but he did not seem the least impressed by this, neither did he charge me with any parting message to Muriel. Indeed, his manner altogether mystified me; he looked excited and as though he were in the best of spirits; his strong, buoyant nature had rallied again; he was young enough to be sanguine and his uncle's energy had infused new life into him. "Nil desperandum" was certainly Bryan Royston's favourite motto

CHAPTER XI.

“IT IS BETTER SO.”

I CONFESS that I was chagrined at Mr. Royston's indifference. I thought he might have shown some slight regret at this breaking off of our daily intercourse. I knew that I should miss him. Two months! it was a long time, and a great deal might happen in it. But I kept these reflections to myself. It was a great pleasure to me to be with Muriel again, and we at once resumed our old habits. Mrs. Hillyard's increasing illness obliged us to close the piano; but we read French together, and studied harmony, and Muriel made great progress with her pencil. It was sad to see how she strove, and often unavailingly, to interest herself in these various pursuits; how she tried to deceive herself and me with the belief that her work gave her pleasure! She would go on steadily through the day, her dear face becoming paler and graver, but towards evening she would give it all up, and if Judith did not

need her she would sit for hours at my feet, pretending to read, but in reality thinking of her lover. When Sunday evening came, I accompanied her to the village church, as Judith could not leave her mother. Mrs. Hillyard had grown very exacting and peevish, and could hardly bear her eldest daughter out of her sight, and Muriel found it very difficult to relieve her sister. As we walked across the church-yard she told me sorrowfully that she knew Judith's strength was breaking down, and that the life was killing her; she had had one or two fainting-attacks lately, and the doctor had warned her of over-exertion. Muriel was so absorbed in these thoughts that she failed to recognise a tall figure that stood in the darkest corner of the porch, and she passed into the church without a suspicion that Mr. Royston was following us and had taken his old place behind us; but by-and-bye his deep voice as he repeated the responses reached her, and I saw her start and flush, while her head drooped over her book. When the service was over she whispered to me not to move; there was a book she wanted in the organ-loft; when the congregation had gone she would find it. I knew that this was only

an excuse for lingering in the church until Mr. Royston was out of sight, but of course I treated the statement as though it were gospel, and when the last person had passed out she went in quest of the book, and returned with a shabby little hymn-book that I afterwards found belonged to one of the school-children.

It was a harmless little subterfuge, but it failed utterly. We neither of us knew Mr. Royston. As we stepped out into the golden evening light, and I paused for a moment to admire the sunset, he came quietly to her side. I felt Muriel grasp my arm. "Do not leave me;" that was what her action conveyed. Poor little soul! she was trembling like a leaf.

Mr. Royston looked at her reproachfully. "Why are you afraid of me?" he asked. "Is it not natural that I should wish to see you again? We parted in anger. Do you remember that? Do you think I could carry only that memory with me across the Atlantic?" Then, as she started and looked at him, he continued more gently: "Yes, I am going away, and for a long time; ask Miss Osborne, if you do not believe me. Muriel, I must speak to you for a moment; if you will not listen to me here, I will follow you home and

ask to see your sister. You have no right to refuse me such a request, and," as she hesitated, "if you wish it, Miss Osborne shall remain; but I will not go until you have heard me." And of course he had his way. When had she been able to refuse him anything? But she would not trust herself alone with him. Muriel had not her sister's strength of mind, and her heart was so completely in his keeping. She let him take her hand after that while he guided us to a quiet spot where no spying villager could see us. "It is not right, Bryan," she said more than once; "we have given each other up, and you ought not to have followed us. What shall I say to Judith when I go home? She will think me so weak to listen to you."

"Let her think what she likes," he returned impatiently. "Muriel, you are wrong—you are altogether wrong! I have not given you up; I will never give you up as long as you love me. You made me very angry the other day. I did not understand you, and I thought you were treating me badly; but, my poor darling, you could not help yourself. I know that now, and of course my anger has gone. What do words matter when two people belong

to each other? You have given me up, you say, but in reality you are as much mine as ever."

"Oh, Bryan!" she stammered, but the next moment I was out of ear-shot. How could I stand there when they were holding each other's hands and he was looking at her as though she were all his world and he never meant to part with her? Miss Hillyard might blame me, and rightly too, but my woman's heart was too much for me; they should have a few minutes' happiness if I could procure it for them; so I strolled among the few graves, pausing here and there to trace some homely epitaph, or to stand idly by the church-yard wall, listening to the cawing of the rooks. I am afraid to think how long I stayed there, but the last sunset cloud had faded into grey-ness when I returned to them. They were still standing in the same attitude, and he was still talking to her; but when Muriel saw me she drew her hands away.

"You must go now," she whispered. "We have stayed too long already."

"One moment, my dear." And, as I discreetly walked on, I could still hear their murmuring voices; but before I reached the

gate Muriel joined me. "Bryan asks me to thank you," she said softly. "Miss Osborne, was it very wrong to speak to him? It has made me so happy!" And I could see by the expression of her little dark face that she spoke the truth. Poor child! the thought of his anger had weighed on her heavily; but she had seen him again, and he had told her that he would never give her up, and that one day he meant to claim her, and the assurance had comforted her. "Bryan wanted to see you again, but he thought it best not to follow you," she went on, as we walked towards The Nook. "He says that it was so kind of you to leave us, but that you are always so good to him. I think he means to write to you." So, after all, Mr. Royston had not forgotten his old friend.

When we entered the house, Muriel went in search of her sister, and I remained alone. I did not see Judith until she came to my room to bid me good-night.

"Muriel has been confessing everything to me," she said with a faint smile. She has been a foolish child; but I suppose we must forgive her."

"I am afraid her chaperon needs forgiveness

too." But I could see by her manner that she was not inclined to be hard on me.

"It was a mistake, perhaps, but it has made her happier; and, after all, perhaps it does not matter. Mr. Royston is going away, and before his return——" But here she paused and left her sentence unfinished; but that ominous blank made me shiver. I knew what she meant; if her mother died they would at once leave The Nook. Leylands was in dangerous proximity to Walton; and Muriel must be removed from such an undesirable neighbourhood. A sense of uneasiness pervaded my rest that night. In my waking intervals I reviewed the situation. I began to think that Mr. Grenfell was right, and that Miss Hillyard's strong, inflexible nature would dominate the younger and weaker sister. She had sacrificed her own and her lover's happiness from a sense of duty, and she would exact the same sacrifice of Muriel.

From that day a secret fear assailed me that Mrs. Hillyard would die before Mr. Royston's return. Judith seemed touched by the anxiety I manifested on her mother's account. Every day I questioned her minutely on the invalid's symptoms. I even suggested that,

as money was no object, the best physician should be procured from London. I remember she thanked me with tears in her eyes; another opinion would be a great relief to her—she frankly avowed that; but Mrs. Hillyard would refuse to speak to any strange doctor, or even to see him. A nurse was urgently required at the present moment; but the mere suggestion had brought on one of her worst paroxysms.

"Rebecca and I must go on to the end," she added wearily. "Perhaps, after all, it will not be for much longer. Dr. Morrison says she is certainly weaker, and that the present rally is only the flicker of the candle. He is perfectly honest and reliable, and he refuses to let us hope for any permanent improvement."

I listened to her sadly; but the weeks passed on, and the invalid still lingered. I had heard twice from Mr. Royston. He wrote in a bright, chatty way, and gave me his impressions "of the big young world," as he called it; but he said very little about business. The seven weeks had nearly passed, and I was still at The Nook. Neither Judith nor Muriel would hear of my leaving them; I was well

content to remain. Sometimes I walked over with Mousquetaire to Walton to find some book or paper that I wanted and to have a little chat with Miss Trotter.

I paid one of these fleeting visits the very day term recommenced. I wanted, if possible, to see Mr. Royston and to beg him to keep away from Leylands on Sunday evenings, for I knew that if he showed his face in the church again Miss Hillyard would find some pretext for keeping Muriel at home. As I went in at the gate, I heard Mousquetaire barking in rather a vexed sort of way, and I saw a dark, good-looking young man standing at Mr. Royston's window snapping his fingers at him—a contemptuous familiarity that always provoked my wee doggie.

When I asked Miss Trotter if this were a new master, she looked surprised. "Dear me, ma'am! haven't you heard from the poor young gentleman? Mr. Grenfell only said in his letter yesterday that you would be sure to know all about it." But, as this remark only mystified me, she went on.

"It is sad how accidents happen; and such a fine strong young gentleman, too; never had a day's illness in his life. Dear, dear! that

shows we must not boast in our palmiest days." But here I checked Miss Trotter's rambling sentences by demanding rather brusquely to see Mr. Grenfell's letter; and the good creature brought it at once.

I read it with dismay. Mr. Grenfell stated, in concise language, that his nephew had met with an unfortunate accident. He had fallen through an open trap-door in a narrow street or slum in New York, and had dislocated his shoulder and broken a couple of ribs. He mentioned the name of the hotel where they were staying, and further added that under the circumstances he would be compelled to prolong his stay; and then he mentioned that his nephew intended to write to me.

The young man I had seen was an Oxford friend of Mr. Royston, who had taken his place for the term and would occupy his rooms. When I received my letter the next day, I found the accident had happened fully a fortnight ago, and that they had telegraphed at once for a *locum tenens*, and he had arrived that very day. I wrote off to beg for further intelligence; but long before it arrived I had been obliged to communicate the bad news to Muriel. She was becoming restless, and at

last she questioned me so closely that I could not evade the truth. She was dreadfully distressed, and of course magnified the accident tenfold; it was of no use to tell her that neither a dislocated shoulder nor broken ribs were absolutely dangerous; and her fears only increased when she heard that Mr. Grenfell had returned without him. To satisfy myself as well as her, I wrote to Onslow Square. Mr. Grenfell's reply came by return of post. He thanked me for my kind inquiries, but begged me to be perfectly easy about his nephew; he had quite recovered from his accident, and was as well as ever; but business of an important character had summoned him to Canada—this portion of the sentence was strongly underlined. His own business had obliged him to return, but he had been down to Walton and made it right with the head-master. Mr. Ramsay was giving great satisfaction, and his nephew had extension of absence granted him. Indeed, he scarcely expected to see him back until after Christmas.

I showed this letter to Muriel; she looked much relieved when she had read it, though her face was somewhat grave when Mr. Royston's prolonged absence was mentioned; but

we had no time to discuss it, for a moment later a bell rang violently; Mrs. Hillyard had been taken suddenly with one of her attacks. It was the last. When night came on we were all gathered round her dying bed. Before the end came there was a brief rally; Dr. Morrison had just administered a restorative, when she opened her fast-glazing eyes and uttered her daughter's name.

"I am here, dearest mother! See, my arms are round you."

"Judith," still more feebly, "Horace never did it. You must not be hard on the poor boy. Now you may kiss me; for I am so tired—so tired." And the next moment her head dropped heavily against her daughter's breast.

So tired! No wonder Judith's eyes were dry as she laid down the poor worn-out body: how could she grieve that that tormented, weary spirit was at rest? "It is better so," I heard her say, as, later on, we put a few white flowers in the wasted hands. Yes, it was better so—better that the poor distraught one should be sitting, clothed and in her right mind, at her Master's feet.

CHAPTER XII.

THE SHADOWS FLEE.

IT was towards the end of October that Mrs. Hillyard died, but the close of the year still found us at The Nook.

I retained my rooms at Walton—they suited me so well that I was reluctant to give them up, but Mousquetaire and I seemed to be established permanently at Leylands; and it was an understood thing between us that I should remain with the sisters until they left England.

There was small chance of this at present. Judith's stern purpose had not been carried out; her strong will had been compelled to yield to the pressure of illness. The day after her mother's funeral she had a prolonged fainting-fit that alarmed us all, and for a month she had been unable, from sheer weakness, to raise her head from the pillow.

Muriel and I were with her night and day, for the old servant Rebecca was quite worn out from her exertions in nursing her mistress.

Judith gave us very little trouble; she lay there in her helplessness, speaking seldom, only thanking us gratefully now and again for our trouble. She was always docile and gentle, and took all we brought her in the form of medicine and nourishment without a murmur, but often when she believed herself alone she would clasp her thin hands together, and large, slow tears would roll down her cheeks; but I never dared question her about her trouble. Dr. Morrison had warned us against agitating talk: "you must keep her quiet and give her nourishment every two hours," he had said again and again.

She grew a little stronger presently, and then Rebecca, who seemed to have a man's strength in her gaunt, rugged frame, carried her down every day into the morning-room, and she would lie on her couch beside the window, looking out on the lawn and the leafless trees and watching the robins and thrushes that came to the window-ledge for their daily modicum of crumbs.

One afternoon we were sitting together, and I had wheeled her couch round to the fireside; it was Christmas-eve, and Muriel had gone to the little church to decorate it with evergreens

and holly—two or three of the village children were helping her—and I had been left in charge of Judith.

She had certainly made progress the last few days; perhaps the firelight had given her a tinge of colour; though she still looked shadowy and unsubstantial enough. With returning strength the old energy had revived, and I was grieved to hear her speak of their departure from England as an absolute certainty.

“Dr. Morrison thinks that I shall be fit for the voyage by the end of April,” she said presently. “I have been talking things over with him, and I mean to write to Horace and tell him to expect us about the middle of May. Nay, my dear old friend, you must not look sad about it. Horace wants us, and for Muriel’s sake we must go as soon as possible.”

“Are you sure that you must go?”

“Quite sure,” rather restlessly. “In a few weeks Mr. Royston will be back, and my poor child will be exposed to temptation; he will seek her out, and there will be the old painful scenes again. I must guard her from them, she is so young, and the ordeal is a cruel one.

If I could only get stronger and we could leave Leylands!" And she sighed heavily.

I was spared a reply, for at that moment we heard the loud clanging of the door-bell and the sound of someone parleying with Hannah. If it had been Rebecca—for Hannah was slow-witted and singularly obtuse—the stranger, whoever he might be, would not have attained his end so easily.

As it was, Hannah threw open the door and announced "a gentleman to see Miss Hill-yard," and the next instant Mr. Grenfell entered the room.

In her weakness Judith was not quite mistress of herself, and the surprise was too great; I heard a low exclamation, "Calvert!" then she sank back on the couch as pale as death. I saw a look of alarm cross Mr. Grenfell's face as he caught sight of the wasted features that still looked so lovely.

"Have you been ill?" he asked, in a voice of intense anxiety. "Judith, have I startled you too much? Good heavens! can you not answer me? What has brought you to this?" grasping her hands, as he spoke, with a force and energy that brought a flush to her face.

She made a great effort to speak, when she

saw his uncontrollable agitation; the very impetuosity of his greeting must have told her that she was still beloved.

"Yes, I have been ill," she replied in her soft, deep voice, "and I am very weak still. Miss Osborne," addressing me nervously, "there is no need for you to leave the room; Mr. Grenfell has doubtless come to speak about his nephew." But her eyelids fell before the keen look that seemed to read her through and through.

"Are you so sure of that? In my opinion Bryan is quite able to speak for himself." And there was a tone of suppressed triumph in his voice. "Judith, I have something else to tell you. Why did you not trust me five years ago? Do you think I would have betrayed your confidence? Why did you not say to me that you believed Horace to be guilty?"

"What do you mean?" she returned in a trembling voice; and I gave Mr. Grenfell a warning look as I passed him to fetch her some wine. He took the glass from my hand and put it to her lips. "Drink it," I heard him say in a low voice; "but I have brought you a better cordial than that. Horace is innocent; you know I always told you so, but

now I can prove it to you and the whole world." And, as she fixed her dark eyes on his face with an expression of incredulous astonishment, he said, in a significant voice: "We have found Jacob Dawson."

I shall never forget the look on Judith's face when Mr. Grenfell mentioned that name. It was as though he had brought her the very elixir of life. "Tell me—tell me quickly," she gasped, "what did he say? Oh, Calvert, if this be true, thank God! thank God!" And she could say no more.

It was a wonderful story that Mr. Grenfell told us in the twilight of this winter's afternoon, while the pine logs blazed and spluttered on the hearth, and the ruddy flame lighted up his features. Judith lay back upon her pillows as she listened.

Mr. Royston's accident had proved a piece of good-luck, for it had detained them in New York; and the very day before Mr. Grenfell intended to start for England, leaving his nephew on the fair road to recovery, they heard something that induced Mr. Royston to apply for prolonged leave of absence and to start for Canada as soon as possible.

He reached Quebec about the middle of Oc-

tober, but for some weeks his search for Jacob Dawson was unsuccessful. He travelled from place to place, visiting all sorts of outlying villages, until one evening he arrived at a rough wooden shanty that had been built in a clearing of the forest, where he met with rough but hearty hospitality from its owner, who proved to be no other than Jacob Dawson. Mr. Royston had informed his uncle that he was certainly a good sort of fellow, and that he seemed much concerned when he learned the grave suspicion that had rested on the young Squire. He remembered the circumstances perfectly, and could take his oath of the day and hour when the accident happened, for he had just parted with his old chum Ben Withers, and was on his way to catch the afternoon train that they told him would reach Liverpool that evening. Mr. Royston had made him narrate every circumstance of the day most minutely, and he was amazed to find how his account tallied with Silas Armstrong's and Horace Haldane's. Dawson perfectly remembered that his pipe went out, and that he stopped to beg a match of a young fellow who was chopping wood in a copse.

He was brushing through the underwood when he saw a young man in a brown tweed coat standing with his back against a tree, evidently lost in thought; he had a gun leaning against his arm. He gave him a civil good-morning as he was about to pass him, and at the same moment a fine cock pheasant whirred up between them, and he saw the Squire, as he called him, deliberately aim his gun at the bird. A groan and the fall of a heavy body near them made him start, and as he groped his way through the undergrowth he was horrified to see a young man lying face downwards on the grass.

"The shot must have gone straight to the heart," he told Mr. Royston, for he was quite dead when he lifted him up.

"It was a terrible business; I saw that by the Squire's face," Jacob Dawson had added. "If ever a man looked stricken, it was that poor young fellow when he stepped out of the bushes; and, partly to hearten him up, I said: 'It is a bad job, master, but I saw it all plainly; the shot was not meant for him,' or some such words; and then, as I was in a monstrous hurry, and there was no bringing a dead man to life again, and the Squire did not seem to

hear a word that I said, I thought I would make tracks, and send the first person I could meet to help the poor young chap; but by ill-luck I never came across a creature the whole way to Stoke, and by the time I reached the station the train was up, and I had only just time to jump in; there was a bit of a crowd there, a market or something of that sort, and no one noticed that I had forgotten to take my ticket."

Jacob Dawson had shown plenty of rough feeling when Mr. Royston had narrated to him the history of the trial, and the unsatisfactory verdict that had sent Horace Haldane from his home a self-banished man and had wrecked the peace and happiness of the family. He undertook, if only the Squire would pay the expenses of the two voyages across the Atlantic, to swear to his innocence in any court of justice; but Mr. Royston had assured him that his written evidence duly signed and witnessed would be sufficient; and it was this document, drawn up and attested by a lawyer, that Mr. Royston had brought back with him to England. I listened until Mr. Grenfell had finished his recital, and then, unperceived by Judith, I stole noiselessly from the

room. I was no longer needed; the barrier between these two true hearts was now removed; surely now they would understand each other.

There was a fire in the hall, and I sat down before it to wait for Muriel's return. Hector was stretched on the tiger-skin at my feet, and Mousquetaire was curled up into a black glossy ball beside him. Hannah came presently and arranged the tea-table beside me and lighted the swinging lamp with its soft rose-coloured shade. She had just closed the door behind her, when I heard footsteps outside, and the next moment Muriel entered, bringing a rush of wild gusty air with her and followed closely by Mr. Royston. A glance at Muriel's blushing face assured me that all was well. Then Mr. Royston caught hold of my hands in almost a boyish manner. "Wish me joy," he said; "we have made it all right between us. Muriel has been begging my pardon for treating me so badly, and of course I have forgiven her." And, as he made this audacious speech, Muriel gave her old merry laugh and knelt down on the rug beside me.

"Was it not clever of him to find Jacob Dawson?" she asked, glancing up at him

shyly as he stood with his arm against the carved oaken mantel-piece, looking down upon us both. "Byran says if it had not been for his accident he would never have come across the person who gave him the first clue." And then, after a little more talk, she said reluctantly that she must go to Judith. But she came back again after a few minutes. "Judith wanted to see Byran," she observed, and they went in together. I went away to my own room presently; they would not miss me, I knew that; but by-and-bye Muriel came to me of her own accord.

She did not speak to me at first, as she sat down in her favourite attitude at my feet and shielded her face from the firelight, and I fell in with her mood and kept silence too; but presently I asked her what had become of Mr. Royston.

"He has gone," she replied in a dreamy tone. "His uncle has taken him away. We were talking together, and Mr. Grenfell came out of the drawing-room and told Bryan that they must go; 'your sister is exhausted, and must rest for the remainder of the evening,' he said to me, 'but we are coming over to church to-morrow.' I went to Judith, and she

told me that they would certainly come to us after service. Think, dear Miss Osborne, what a Christmas Day it will be! We had been dreading it so, and of course it will be sad without poor mother, but I cannot help feeling that she is happy and knows everything, and one cannot wish her back. Oh, if only Horace could be with us to-morrow! But Judith says he will come soon, she is sure of that now."

"Tell me, Muriel," I said, in a teasing tone, as I stroked her bright hair, "were you very much surprised when you saw Mr. Royston?" And she fell into my trap very innocently; it was evidently a pleasure to her to recall every incident of this eventful afternoon.

"Oh, I will tell you about that," she returned, softly. "Mrs. Mostyn had just left me to finish the chancel cross, but she promised to send old Betty presently to sweep up the leaves; so I was all alone; but somehow I did not seem to mind. The church was very dark, for there were only two or three candles lighted, but I sat in the pew underneath the pulpit and worked on quite happily. Such nice thoughts seemed to come to me; I

thought of dear mother and Beaver together, and, though it made me sad to think of Horace, something seemed to whisper deep down in my heart, 'Supposing, after all, that Judith had made a mistake, and that the poor boy never meant to do it,' for somehow the darkness and stillness were so restful, and it was Christmas-eve, and the echo of the angels' song seemed to reach me. 'Peace on earth,' I murmured to myself, as I laid the prickly cross aside; 'will there be peace for us too, for Judith and Horace and my poor Bryan?' And then all at once my heart gave a great leap, for the little side-door had swung open, and there was a rush of cold air. And then I felt as though I were in a dream, for someone was walking down the aisle, carrying his head very high; but just then the candles guttered and went out in the sudden draught, and it was quite dark. And still the footsteps came nearer; and I called out, 'Don't frighten me, please. Speak, whoever you may be,' for, you know, I had not clearly seen his face; and then I heard Bryan laugh—his old delicious laugh—and the next moment his strong arms were round me, and I did not mind the darkness one bit."

"And then, of course, you came home, like sensible young people?"

"We did nothing of the kind," she returned, shyly. "Bryan had some matches in his pocket, and we lighted the candles again, and sat down in the vestry, and he told me everything. Oh, what a wonderful story! I could not help crying over it; and then Bryan scolded me, because, he said, I ought to be too happy to be with him to shed a single tear; but of course he was joking, for his own voice was not quite steady. I think we should have sat there until now, only old Betty began clattering up and down in her clogs, and coughing in a wheezy tone, and then Bryan got impatient, and said he should take me home. But I made him put on my ring first, the one he had given me in the summer; but he told me that he had bought me another in New York, which he said must be the real engaged ring, only I could wear both if I liked. It is very beautiful, is it not?" showing me the brilliant half-hoop of diamonds, "but, somehow, I like the old one best," she finished, with a smile that it was a pity her lover could not see.

CHAPTER XIII.

"CALVERT HAS FORGIVEN ME."

I DID not see Judith until late that night. She had been left alone by her own wish.

When I was at last admitted, I found her lying back in her chair by her bedroom fire. To my surprise, she had evidently been weeping, but she held out her hand to me with a lovely smile.

"You must have thought me very neglectful and selfish, my dear old friend," she said, as she pointed to a chair near her. "Sit down beside me. It is late, I know, but I am not ready for sleep yet, and I must talk to you a little."

"There is no need to talk to-night," I replied, looking at her anxiously, "and the hall clock is chiming eleven. Let me congratulate you, and then I will go."

"Yes, you shall wish me joy," she returned, still smiling; "but I do not mean to part with you yet. I wished to be alone this evening;

I sent Calvert away before he was ready to go. I wanted to realise my own happiness—to thank God for his inestimable mercies; and then there was my poor boy."

"You have been writing to him?" for her little desk was open beside her.

"Yes, indeed; that was my first duty. Oh, Miss Osborne, do you think Horace will ever forgive me? Do you know how I have wronged him all these years? I was harder to him than his judges. I mistook his grief for remorse; in my heart I believed that he killed our poor darling in a fit of jealous rage, and nothing but Jacob Dawson's evidence would ever have banished this suspicion from my mind."

"Dear Judith, it is terrible to think how you must have suffered."

"Yes, but it was my own fault," in a low, vehement voice. "Calvert has convinced me of that now. He used to tell me in those old days that I was too hard on Horace—that we must make allowances for natures that are dissimilar from our own; but I never cared to hear him talk so. Beaver was so good and gentle; in all their disputes Horace had been the one to blame. Oh," hiding her face with a

shudder, “what does the Bible tell us? ‘Who-soever hateth his brother is a murderer.’ For a time, I fear, I hated Horace; I could not bear him to come near me or touch me; and from that day when they carried Beaver home and laid him on his bed, I have never kissed Horace. Calvert looked so grieved when I told him that.”

I was grieved too. No wonder she was worn, with such a terrible conflict. She read my unspoken sympathy in my eyes, and her face softened with an expression of exquisite tenderness.

“Why are you all so good to me? Calvert has forgiven me; he says the barrier is down, and that he shall never misunderstand me again. Oh, the utter rest when he told me this! That is how we shall feel if we ever attain heaven, when the white robes are given us, and the Father’s smile is no longer hidden. If human forgiveness be so sweet, surely that will be sweeter still.”

“True, dearest.”

“I told Calvert so; and then I begged him to leave me; I could not be happy, even with him, until I had confessed my sin to Horace—until I had entreated him to forgive me too.

That is how I have spent my evening. Now I am easier in my mind, and to-morrow—to-morrow Calvert will come to me again."

This was all she said; and, though I sat there for another half-hour, speaking of many things, she did not again mention her lover.

Muriel's child-like nature had shown none of this reticence. But Judith's character was more intense; her strong, passionate love for the man she had given up needed no expression; it was a part of herself; it would live or die with her. I longed to ask her if the reconciliation were complete, and if she had again plighted her troth to him, but some undefined feeling kept me from asking the question.

I found as we walked together to church the next morning that Muriel was perplexing herself with the same question.

"I do not quite understand Judith," she said, as we walked down the white, frozen road. "Her manner is a little mysterious this morning. I was showing her my ring, and then I asked her if Mr. Grenfell would give her back hers, and she started and looked so pained. 'No, no; he must not think of such a thing,' she said, in quite a shocked voice;

'there is no ring needed between friends, and Calvert and I are only dear friends now,' and when I was about to remonstrate, she pushed me away, and begged me not to talk any more; and then you called me, and I was obliged to leave her. Dear Miss Osborne, what could she have meant? and she has loved him all these years."

"We must wait until she explains herself more fully," was my sage answer; but my uneasiness returned in full force. Happily, Muriel's thoughts were diverted at that moment by the appearance of the two gentlemen. I regarded Mr. Grenfell rather narrowly; he looked well and happy; there was content in his eyes, and as he asked after Judith his voice unconsciously softened; he seemed to me a different man—as though a load of care had been taken off his shoulders.

Judith was awaiting us in the morning-room when service was over. She greeted Mr. Grenfell with her usual quiet dignity, but it was evidently an effort to her, and her varying colour betrayed her emotion. Mr. Grenfell seemed anxious to meet her on her own ground; he sat down beside her and talked about the church decorations and the sermon,

while Mr. Royston and Muriel were whispering together in the window.

If he wished to soothe her and put her at her ease, he certainly succeeded, for after a time she ceased to change colour with every word, and was soon talking quite happily with him; only just at the last her nervousness returned. He had risen to take his leave, when I heard him say, in a low, meaning voice, "I shall come to-morrow, and then we will have our talk. You must not put me off as you did last night." But to this she made no reply, and, after holding her hand for a moment, he left her without another word.

Muriel went to the afternoon service. I rather fancied from her manner that she and Mr. Royston had come to some sort of arrangement, but I was obliged to let her go alone; Judith had had a return of faintness soon after the gentlemen had left, and it was necessary for someone to stay with her.

I hoped she would sleep; but I soon found out that this was not her intention, for on looking up from my book I found her dark eyes fixed on my face rather wistfully.

"Should you mind if I were to talk to you a little?" she asked, rather humbly. "Some-

times one needs advice; and you are so wise and good, I know you will tell me what is the right thing to do."

"How do you mean, my dear?" for I would not have understood her for the world; but I could see by the nervous fluttering of her hands that she was much distressed; some new complication or difficulty was threatening her new-found happiness.

I entreated her to repose full confidence in me, and she at once responded.

"I am very troubled," she began. "Last night I would not think of it; I kept all such thoughts at bay; I wanted only to be happy and thank God for giving me back my friend. I seemed to desire nothing else. But men are not like us; they want more than we do."

"Well?" for she had paused here.

"To-morrow Calvert is coming to talk to me; and I know what he will say. He tried to say it last night, only I stopped him; I told him I could only think of Horace. Friendship will not content him; he says we must be married without delay—that I owe it to him not to keep him without his wife any longer; and to-morrow he will come and say this again."

"Well, dearest, there can be but one answer

to that; you love him far too dearly to refuse such a reasonable request."

"I love him too dearly to marry him," she returned, in great agitation. "Am I fit to marry anyone? Look at me now. Am I not a wreck? My health is gone, my nerves are weakened; these six terrible years have robbed me of more than my youth and good looks. Miss Osborne, do not think of me, but only of him. He is strong, in the prime of life; a grand career is opening before him: is he to be dragged down by a sickly wife, who will have nothing but love to give him? No, his very generosity will make him plead with me. I must save him at any cost."

"Judith," I said, very quietly, "you have asked my advice, and I will give it. To-morrow, when Mr. Grenfell comes, you will say to him all that you have said to me just now; put it before him as strongly as you will, let him read your very thoughts; and then abide by his decision."

"But he may decide wrongly," she returned, in her quick way.

"He will not. Every man knows what is best for his own happiness; he will be a better judge of that than you or I. All these years

you have listened to your own pride, and now it is speaking to you again; it is telling you at this moment that it will be better for you both to suffer, than to accept his lifelong support in your helplessness and weakness."

"You are hard on me," she whispered. "If you only knew how I long to make him happy!"

"Tell him so, and place yourself in his hands. He is a man whom no woman need fear to trust with her fate." And I absolutely refused to listen to another word.

I thought it best to give Muriel a hint that Mr. Grenfell was expected; so when our early luncheon was over I was not surprised to hear that she had a pressing errand to the little village of Moreton. It was a lovely afternoon, and the hard, white roads looked inviting under the December sunshine, and the black, unsightly hedge-rows were sparkling with the glittering hoar-frost. I thought Muriel took a great deal of trouble to explain the exact road that she meant to take, but I fully understood her when Mr. Royston came with his uncle a quarter of an hour later; and I knew he would overtake her long before she reached her destination.

I spent a solitary afternoon, for even Mous-

quetaire had forsaken me, and his little legs were probably trying to keep up with Hector's majestic strides; but I was not dull; on the contrary, a sense of content and well-being stole over me as the shadows of the winter twilight closed round me.

After all, there is something real and satisfying even in reflected happiness; and, unless one's nature is eaten up by the canker-worm of selfishness, even a lonely middle-aged woman without close ties can find plenty of warm human interest. "With what measure ye mete"—oh, the verity of those divine words! it is because we sow our seed so sparingly that our harvest of love is so scanty. To love much—that is our life-duty; and yet when we come to die our work will have been poorly done. Who will weep for us, when we have closed up our hearts to our brothers and sisters, when we have failed to stretch out kindly hands of fellowship to our fellow-workers, or to share the burden of some poor overweighted toiler? "With what measure ye mete." Oh, well may we say from our hearts, in the words of our glorious Litany, "From envy, hatred, malice, and all uncharitableness," that is, lovelessness, "good Lord, deliver us!"

I was still alone when Muriel and Mr. Royston returned; but Muriel had hardly taken her place at the little tea-table before Mr. Grenfell joined us, and the next moment he told me in a whisper that Miss Haldane wished to speak to me. I saw by the light in his eyes that all was well; and the first glance at Judith's face corroborated this: she looked like a child tired out with overmuch happiness.

"He has settled it all," she said, in a low voice, as I sat down beside her. "He has been so good and patient with me. He let me tell him everything—all my miserable, hopeless feelings—before he said a word. I told him that all these years of sorrow and nursing had worn me out, and that I should never be the same Judith who used to walk with him through the Kilvington woods, and I showed him my grey hairs; but he only smiled and said I needed him all the more to take care of me."

"And you have promised to marry him?"

"How could I help it, when he convinced me that nothing else would make him happy, that he must have me beside him to cheer him in his daily work? Oh, what a wonderful thing love is!" she went on—"love like Cal-

vert's, I mean. Do you know, he tells me that he would rather have me for his wife, even if I were never to leave this couch again, than any other woman in the world? He made me see that pain or sickness or any mere human infirmity should be no bar to two hearts that love each other. 'It is you,' he said, 'your mind, your sympathy, your companionship, for which I have craved all these years, and which has made this world seem such an empty place to me. Judith, you made one mistake in your life when you sent me from you; but you shall not make another.' And after that I yielded."

"For once in your life you have been a wise woman," I said; but she only shook her head with a smile.

"I doubt the wisdom—we must have time to prove that—but I know my one prayer will be to make him happy."

Mr. Grenfell had pressed for a speedy marriage; the early spring in so cold a climate would be injurious to Judith in her weakened state, and her doctor had already advised her removal to a warmer place; but nothing would induce Judith to consent to it until her

brother wrote to add his entreaties and to state his intention of being present at the wedding.

We had said good-by to Leylands and The Nook, and were settled in rooms at Kensington, when Horace Haldane arrived. I was not present at his meeting with his sisters. When I rejoined the family circle I found him sitting by Judith's couch, with Mr. Grenfell opposite to them. He rose directly, and shook hands with me in a quick, embarrassed manner that recalled our first meeting at The Nook, but after a time he grew more sociable and at his ease, and we became great friends.

His singular likeness to Judith was still more apparent as I noticed him more closely. He was very handsome indeed; I had never seen a more striking-looking man; and his air of deep melancholy only added to his attraction. Before I had been long in his society I felt that adversity had done much for him; and Judith assured this to me with tears in her eyes.

"He reminds me of Beaver," she said, with a sigh, "he has grown so gentle and considerate; he seems to think so little of himself now. He has been telling me everything. For

some years he was terribly reckless; the shock of Beaver's death and the misery of all that time seemed to rob him of his faith; he thought God and man were against him, and he cared nothing about his life; in spite of his innocence, the hand of Cain seemed on him, and he had been driven forth an exile from his home."

"Poor fellow!"

"Yes; and do you know who it was who saved him? Not his sister, for she believed that he was guilty; no, it was that noble creature Sibyl Grey, who held out a helping hand to him, whose gentle sympathy lifted him out of the mire of despondency. At his worst moment, when he was sitting with companions who were far more lawless and reckless than he, a letter from Sibyl reached him. It was only a short letter, a few earnest womanly words, but it gave him just what he wanted and restored him to self-respect. 'Do not despair,' she wrote; 'it was a cruel accident, but you must not let it spoil your life. If you were angry with him, you are not angry now. Ah, I know too well that if it were possible you would give your life for his, that you would lay it down, oh, so gladly!' And then

when he wrote to thank her for those words, which he told her had saved him from sinking deeper, there came another letter, still more sweet and womanly, in which she bade him live nobly and well. 'We have both suffered,' she wrote. 'If Beaver had lived I should have been his wife. I am not afraid of telling you this; he is in his grave, and his blest spirit is now in that other world where there is neither marrying nor giving in marriage. You tell me, Horace, that you have spoiled my life. My dear brother—let me call you that once, for Beaver's sake—you must not say that again. Though I have wept for him, though I sorrow, still I am not without consolation. Young as he was, he was fit to die; death had not struck him down unprepared. Sometimes he used to tell me that he had an idea that he would never live to be old. I think he had a dread of sickness and death, for I remember he said once that he envied a soldier dying on the battle-field; "short and sharp"—that is the fittest death for a man. He was so good and brave; I think there was nothing he feared. Horace, let us live, you and I, caring for others, not for ourselves, that we may be worthy to join him in the higher life.' "

"Judith," I asked, as she paused, "does your brother still care for Miss Grey?"

"He will always care for her," she replied, mournfully. "All the Haldanes are tenacious in their attachments; when they love it is for ever."

"Do you think that now he will have a chance of winning her?" But Judith hesitated.

"I cannot tell. They have not met for six years. She has lost her mother, and is very lonely. Horace is changed, as I said before; he has grown so like dear Beaver. One can never tell in these cases. If only Horace could be induced to go down to Kilvington! but I think Calvert will persuade him by-and-bye." And then, as we heard voices approaching, the conversation broke off.

After all, Judith's fears were not without foundation, and for many a year her broken health was a cause of grave anxiety to her husband; but nothing could mar their intense happiness.

Mr. Grenfell rose high in his profession, and before many years were over he attained to the bench; and, in spite of her weak health,

Lady Grenfell made their house a rendezvous for men of intellect and talent.

Judith was a woman who would have been a leader of a *salon* in the old days; clever men sought to converse with her, and old and young raved about her beauty. In society she was a little grave and queenly in her manners, and dispensed her favours and hospitality with unconscious condescension, but to her husband she was the meekest of women.

Blessed as Muriel was in her husband and children, her content was not deeper than her sister's. Though the Grenfells' home was childless, they were all in all to each other. I still kept my old rooms at Walton, but I was seldom there, except for a few weeks at a time; my time was spent either with Lady Grenfell in her luxurious London house, or in the pretty home at Clifton where the Roystons lived.

Now and then I went down to Kilvington, where Horace Haldane and his sweet-faced wife lived at The Warren. Sibyl Grey had been won at last; pity for her old friend had developed into love, and Horace's marriage had followed his sister's within a year or two.

But it was long before his wife's influence

induced him to take up his residence at The Warren. It was not until their twin sons were little lads of three years that he came back to his old neighbourhood.

When Horace Haldane first crossed the threshold of his old home, his sister, Lady Grenfell, was the first to greet him. "Horace," she whispered, as she took his hand, "this must be the beginning of a new life to you; and, dear, there must be no shadows from the past. Beaver and our mother rest well. Hark how the bells are ringing! the people are glad to have their Squire back again. Sibyl, let me look at the boys. What fine fellows—finer even than Muriel's. And now tell me, my dear brother, which is Horace and which is Beaver? Nay, I know; this must be Beaver," laying her hand on one fair curly head.

"Yes, you are right, Judith," returned her brother, with a touch of sadness in his tone, "Sibyl would have it so—Horace, tell your aunt how dearly you love Beaver.—I never saw such a fellow," he continued, jesting to hide deeper feelings; "he will give up his toys if Beaver only expresses a wish for them; they are never happy apart; we are obliged to

let them sleep together. Never were brothers so devoted to each other." He finished with a sigh, that was gently echoed by Sibyl, though the next moment she looked up in her husband's face with a loving smile.

. THE END.

